

The Whole World - The Whole Galaxy - The Whole Universe

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Summary: A tale that moves back and forth through time, examining the beginning of John-117, and his life after being named the Reclaimer. CONTAINS SPOILERS FOR HALO 4. If you've ever wondered about the BEFORE, this is simply one interpretation of it. [Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction! I do not own any but the OCs!]

1. 00: The Beginning

Elizabeth Force was everything her name lived up to â€" a force of nature. She was an able-bodied child, always wanting to be hands-on and striving to win, with a competitive streak a mile wide. She was often recognized for accomplishments, both on and off-planet. Athletics, debate, chess. Nobody knew how she'd done it, and she would always smile and say, "With a little luck." At sixteen, she had graduated with honours ahead of most of her class. She had the brain of a genius and the body of a goddess, with long dark hair and brilliant blue eyes. She excelled in all her endeavours, military and otherwise, and when she was twenty, she met the man of her dreams. Of all her achievements â€" her career, her home, her marriage â€" her son was the thing of which she was the most proud. John.

He came into the world in a wash of blood and screaming, and yet he himself did not scream. Elizabeth had chosen not to take any painkillers, however ill-advised her decision was, and she knew that as soon as she saw her child that all of her pain would be forgotten. She was right.

"He has your eyes," the nurse said, swaddling him in a cloth after they had cleaned both he and Elizabeth. Elizabeth took him in her arms and felt a buzz of happiness that she had never experienced before. They told her it was just a rush of hormones, but she knew better.

"He'd better have her looks, too," her husband joked. Shane stole a glance down at his wife and smirked a little, knowing she'd understand the tease of his comment even in the midst of the chaos

that was the hospital.

"Shut up," she said, unable to stop the smile on her face. "I'd have never married you if you weren't good looking." It was a lie, of course, because for those two, it had been love at first sight, and everyone around them knew it. They'd only been married a year, and already they had a child. Elizabeth squirmed in the bed, unable to stop twitching her feet. She was too excited to think straight.

"I'm the luckiest guy in the world," Shane said absently, mesmerized by his son. The child seemed to have a sharp interest in everything around him; only minutes had passed since he had been awoken into the world and already he wanted to reach and grab and examine. He started with a tendril of Elizabeth's dark hair, wrapping it up in his first that was easily the size of two of Shane's fingers, then attempting to thrust it into his mouth.

"Have you decided on a name?" the nurse prompted, unwilling to interrupt their moment any sooner. She smiled at the couple, thinking that she remembered a time when she felt that way about her own husband, and prepared to make the necessary entry onto the tablet for the birth certificate.

"John," the couple said in unison. They looked at each other and laughed, and Elizabeth shook her head. "Jonathan Andrew." Her smile wavered a little, and Shane rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. They had never discussed a middle name, knowing that as soon as she'd discovered she was pregnant (and long before she knew the sex of the baby), she'd taken to calling it John. But even her husband knew that the middle name slot would go to his brother, a Marine who had been killed during an off-planet skirmish right before they'd discovered she was pregnant.

He couldn't help that his eyes watered up, and he ignored how un-masculine it looked. "I think it's perfect," he said. He made an effort to clear his throat, then sighed, unable to stop a few tears from rolling down his cheeks.

"Oh, honey," Elizabeth whispered, leaning into his hand with her head. She rested her lips upon his knuckles and pressed them against his skin softly, then looked into her arms at her child. He had a big name to live up to, but she felt like he could do it. After all, luck was on his side, because it had always been on hers.

2. 01: Chapter 1

If there was one thing Elizabeth Force knew, it was to trust her instinct. She was still alive because of it, and she'd never make the mistake of doubting herself like she'd seen so many before her do. She could follow orders as good as the next person, but it was her way of being able to see the situation outside of the initial conflict that allowed her to ensure that everyone around her returned home safely. Of course, she hadn't deployed in over a year — Shane was gone, unfortunately, and the house seemed too big without him, despite how well she and John tried to fill it with love and laughter in his absence. She had a big red circle around the day on the calender when he was due back, and every day she lifted her son up to cross another red slash through the previous one.

She trusted her instinct because she had no choice, and when she became a mother, that only increased tenfold. She knew when something was wrong with her son before he did, and normally when doctors would want to label an individual a worrisome type, John's primary physician even had to admit that Elizabeth always knew when her son was coming down with something. He wished more parents had that gift " or at least, had it accurately. She was the only one who didn't call relentlessly for the first year of her child's life asking questions about every little cough, sneeze, or otherwise noise that came out of their young.

And when Elizabeth woke up that morning and rolled over to see that her son was already awake and watching television in the next room, she had that feeling so bad it made her want to throw up. She got herself out of bed and went to check on him as calmly as she could, and he smiled at her like he always did. He was six, and he was self-sufficient enough that he could serve himself breakfast as long as he didn't go wild with it. He was also tall enough that he could reach things he shouldn't, but thankfully they had few incidents in that area.

"Hey baby," she called, standing in the kitchen over a pot of coffee. "What do you want to do today?" She looked over her shoulder at him, raising her eyebrows when their eyes met. His own blue eyes matched hers like a mirror; they were a Force family trait. However recessive blue eyes were as a genetic, within her family tree they thrived.

"I dunno," John said, shrugging a little. He looked back down at the bowl of cereal he had in his lap, then dug his spoon in and took another mouthful of grain and oat shapes, carefully picking around the marshmallows. He always ate those last, because they were the best. "Can we go to the new park? Maybe play with Colby?" he asked, squinting at his mother from his vantage point on the floor. He watched as she moved around the kitchen, and couldn't help thinking that she looked like she was dancing somehow.

"Colby, huh?" she said, pouring herself that coffee finally. She unlatched a plastic container and stole a cinnamon roll out of it, then carried them both into the next room and sat down on the floor next to her son. "Want some?" she asked, lifting the coffee up to his face. She laughed as he squirmed away, putting a hand up to block the cup of black ichor.

"Ewww, no!" he cried, laughing as he tried to scoot away without knocking his cereal all over the carpet. He liked it when she sat with him; dad always sat on the couch. Not mom.

"Okay, how about this," she said, moving the cup away from him finally. He hated how coffee smelled, and she'd let him taste it once a few months back. Ever since then... she grinned. "I'll call Colby's mom while you get dressed, then we'll try to see if they want to meet at the park in about a half hour. Then, we can go get lunch, and maybe..." she trailed off.

"Maybe..." John prompted. He looked at her seriously; he had a vested interest in this outing, so he was interested to know what she was withholding.

"Maybe, just maybe, we can go to the aerospace museum after," she

finished. She watched as John's eyebrows nearly shot off of his forehead, and he leaped up, bowl in hand. Milk threatened to slosh over the edge, the tidal wave of liquid nearly causing the marshmallows to stick to his hand. He set the bowl down on the coffee table before he really did drop it, then looked at his mom as seriously as he could.

"Serious?" he tested, his head cocking to the side. It was a trait he had gotten from his father; skepticism.

"One-hundred percent," she swore.

"YES!" he cried, jumping up and down. He grabbed her in for a hug so suddenly that she almost dropped her own breakfast, and she had to set her cup of coffee down before she could return his enthusiastic hug. "Mom, you are the BEST!"

"I know," she said, winking at him. "Now, finish eating, then get dressed and brush your teeth. All of your teeth, not just the front four," she warned him. She dropped a kiss on his cheek and then gave him a swat as he retrieved his bowl. She knew he'd be too excited to eat the rest of it, and wasn't surprised when she saw him go straight to the kitchen and dump the few marshmallows that were left into the sink.

She called Lisa, Colby's mother, and set up the afternoon. Apparently Colby had woken up with similar designs, and the two women had a good laugh. Lisa was the only real friend Elizabeth could really say she had aside from her husband, obviously. She had a lot of friends who were on that outer ring of her social circle, and of course, people she worked with, but Lisa was in a similar situation with her own son, and so the two bonded. Lisa also had a wickedly sharp sense of humour, and Elizabeth's biting sarcasm could sometimes be too much for the other wives. Because both women were enlisted, they often felt like they had nothing to talk about with the wives who simply spent their days playing house, and when Shane had introduced them, it was "well, it went about as well as when John and Colby had met.

Elizabeth set to getting dressed herself, first washing the stick of the cinnamon bun off of her hands before she tried to do anything else. She had almost forgotten that feeling in her stomach when she woke up, but when she looked in on John as he tried to decide whether to wear his UNSC t-shirt or his super hero t-shirt, she felt it come back with a vengeance. She continued down the hall, grabbing a hair clip she'd absently left on the entertainment center, and wound her long, dark brown hair up with it.

She stood perfectly still in the quiet house after that, arms folded and fingers tapping on either side of them. Why did she feel this way? John hadn't given her the slightest indication he was sick. She trusted Lisa with her own life, and she certainly trusted her with John " Lisa had amazing combat records, not to mention was well-versed in safety and first aid otherwise. She felt that sensation like a weight on her chest, and it made her mind race into dark hallways without rationalizing them first, giving her all sorts of awful ideas.

"Momma?" Her son's voice broke her from her dark reverie. John was tugging on the belt-loop of her jeans, and from the tone of voice he

used, it wasn't the first time he'd tried to get her attention. As she snapped back into reality, she realized that he was looking at her with a furrowed brow.

"What is it, little man?" she asked, crouching down to tie one of his shoes.

"Are you okay?" he asked after a pause. It seemed like he didn't want to ask it, and in truth, he didn't. He could always tell when something was wrong with his mom. She had a... a way about her. And he was good with adults â€" well, people really. It was more than a youthful innocence and insight that would be lost as he grew older, too. He had the talent of reading what people didn't say, and he was scary good at it.

"Yeah," she replied. Her smile came too late, and by the way it didn't meet her eyes, he knew she was lying. He didn't want to press the issue, but he didn't want his mom to be upset either. It put him in a hard spot, so he only reached out and hugged her after she'd stood back up, burying his face into her side.

"Love you, momma," he said honestly.

"And I love you," she promised. "More than anything else in the whole world."

"In the whole galaxy?" he asked.

"In the whole universe," she responded.

The dialogue had been their ritual since as far back as he could remember. He'd heard his dad say it to her on several occasions, but never to him; it was more of a mommy and me thing. Not that his dad didn't tell him he loved him (he absolutely did), but it was obvious he had a stronger bond with his mother, despite her unwanted absences during his earlier developmental years. Shane had said often that John seemed to be acutely aware of when she was deployed, and he was particularly hard to handle. Then Elizabeth would come back and he'd be like an angel. It drove Shane nuts.

"Come on," she said, breaking away from him to grab her keys. "We're going to walk. It's beautiful outside. Colby and his mom are meeting us there," she informed him, grabbing her phone and shoving it into her back pocket.

John paused to grab the little bookbag full of designated "outside" toys in case he and Colby got tired of swinging (which they never did), then followed behind her. As she opened the door, she looked over at him and asked him why he'd chosen to wear the UNSC shirt instead of the superhero shirt.

"Aren't they the same thing?" he asked her, brow furrowed again.

Elizabeth smiled so hard it hurt. Her son thought she was a superhero. She'd never had a more proud moment.

Elizabeth sat down on the bench next to Lisa, watching on as Colby and John raced for the swings. She pursed her lips, almost calling for him to be careful, and then thought better of it. No amount of cautionary warning would ever stop her son from doing anything, and true to his form, he pulled ahead of his friend and leaped onto the swing with the speed and grace of a wild cat. At her side, Lisa suppressed a chuckle.

"Your kid is _fast_," she commented, pulling a bottle of water from her purse and stealing a sip. She cleared some of her blonde hair from her face and grinned, turning more fully to her friend yet still finding she could watch the kids from that angle. "He's getting taller by the day, too."

"No kidding," Elizabeth agreed. "Shane and I are both tall, so he's sure to sprout like a weed even worse when he hits his teens. I just hope he isn't as gangly as Shane was. Have you ever seen photos of him as a teenager?" At that, the duo had a nice cackle. Her husband hadn't always been so handsome and put together; as a teenager he was like a beanpole. All height, no muscle. He'd finally filled in around the time they'd met, though.

"So, when is he supposed to be back, anyways?" Lisa asked, brushing her hand at a gnat that couldn't take a hint.

"A month from yesterday. John's excited. We'll both be home for his birthday this go-round," she replied. "I hate that it's like we always take turns. Not how I wanted it to be, but you know the drill." She sighed wistfully. At a loud cry of shock, she jerked her attention back to the boys, ready to spring into action if she perceived a problem.

"Whoa there," Lisa said, holding her hand out to steady her brunette friend. "You're a little on edge today."

Elizabeth hated that her worry translated so obviously, and settled back down onto the bench. The kids were just horsing around in the grass. There was nothing to panic about. "I just woke up with that feeling, Lisa. I don't know. Like..." and she trailed off.

Lisa didn't say anything; she didn't have to. They both knew what it was like, the unknown. That feeling that the last time you saw your spouse would be the last time you _ever_ saw them. They both had the scars to prove how hard they could fight to come home, though. "I'm sure it's fine," she assured Elizabeth, her voice soothing. "I talked to Rick today. Hilarious. They've been drifting around in space for the better part of a week, waiting for orders to come back. The military never ceases to amaze me in their organized disorganization."

"Mm," Elizabeth agreed. She glanced up again, pushing those feelings back down. The boys had established themselves in the dirt and were quickly unloading the toys John had brought, setting the little action figures up to have a battle. "I just don't want him to grow up, some days," she muttered.

"You don't have to tell me twice," Lisa chuckled. "Just the other day Colby told me he's seriously considering ODST," she said with a biting laugh. "Why does he even know what that is? I hate it."

"Feet first," Elizabeth chimed softly. She was no stranger to the Hell Jumpers. "At least he's got goals," she added wryly.

"He gets it from his father," the blonde assured her.

"Speaking of the UNSC, I need to tell you what John said to me today," Elizabeth said, straightening a little. She couldn't help her smile as she began relaying the superhero versus UNSC shirt to her friend, and watched as Lisa laughed loudly.

"Seriously?" she cawed. "That's adorable. He thinks you're a superhero."

"But I am, madam," Elizabeth said, her tone full of false bravado. "Anyways," she sighed. "They start school this fall. I can't say I'm ready to see him go. I hate how empty the house is without Shane, but when he's in school all day? It's going to su-uck," she said, dragging out the word for emphasis.

"You're telling me," Lisa agreed. "Colby is so excited he can hardly talk about anything else. Just questions, _endless_ questions. Where he'll go, what he'll do, who he'll meet. Were we ever that naïve?" she asked, her brown eyes twinkling.

"If only," Elizabeth said, a laugh working its way into the end of her sentence. "I loved school when I was a kid. I was good at everything."

"It's easy when you're good," Lisa countered. "I was a little chub. I was horrible at sports, had glasses and braces. I wasn't always this hot," she promised. It was funny to hear her say it, because the blonde was probably one of the prettiest, in Elizabeth's head anyways, women she'd ever met. She managed to still be feminine even though she could pick a rock off a cliff at nearly a half-mile away.

"So what changed?" Elizabeth asked, turning her head to check on the boys. They were still posted up playing their game, and it appeared that John had overtaken Colby's territory. Ever the strategist.

"I don't know," Lisa mused. "I hit seventeen or so and the braces came off. Dad put me up for eye surgery, and then took me out to my grandparent's farm and put a rifle in my hand. Said he'd give me a dollar for every can I shot off the fence. I cleaned him out," she said. She laughed hysterically at the memory, and Elizabeth smiled.

"They say it's a learned talent, but anyone who's a marksman knows better," Elizabeth agreed. "Me? I'm good, but I'm not going to be on any sniper teams anytime soon."

"You're too upfront for that," Lisa agreed, the comment meant to flatter. "I like to play around in the background, and you're the one who's running in and using the butt of your rifle to _hit_ people. I was a class behind you at the academy, don't forget. I saw your training exercises. You were like an animal," she observed.

"I was, wasn't I?" Elizabeth said fondly.

"That you were," Lisa echoed. "All the boys in my class were

confused, because they couldn't understand why they were being beaten by a girl. They say times have changed, but really, when it boils down to it, guys still marvel at the fact that we can do anything they can do on the field, and sometimes better."

"Not all of us," Elizabeth countered. "My class also had the highest drop rate of female cadets that year. Not sure why."

"Because you were too much to compete with," Lisa crowed. They laughed.

Around noon, the hot dog vendor wheeled his cart through the park and Elizabeth realized that she was starving. Her cinnamon roll and coffee had been enough to wake her up, but beyond that, they hadn't been good for much else. She let John order the food because he insisted that he knew what she would order, and to her surprise, he did. He even remembered the relish.

After they had finished, it was time to head to the museum, and John had finally found the last of his toy soldiers buried in the dirt. They said their goodbyes and walked the short distance home to drop them off, then it was off to the naval center for the much-anticipated aerospace adventure.

As luck would have it, she ran into an old friend from school as they crossed the threshold where all of the larger antiqued planes were held. John became anxious and begged to look around the room. Reluctantly, Elizabeth agreed. "Don't go too far," she warned him. He was off before she'd even finished her sentence, no doubt to crawl inside of one of the display cockpits and pretend he was flying.

By the time she'd gotten done, she called his name, and felt a cold chill when she realized the room was eerily silent. "John?" she called again. She felt panic edging into her voice. "Jonathan Force!"

As if he'd appeared out of thin air, her son tapped her on the hip. "Right here, mom," he said. He grinned at her. "Sorry. I tried to hurry when I heard you calling, but I couldn't unlatch the harness."

Elizabeth felt her worry melt away, and shook her head. "I should have known," she muttered. "Come on, next room." He walked dutifully by her side after that, straying only far enough to point out what he wanted her to read aloud to him on the plaques. She found it odd that he still did it; John had been able to read for the better part of two years. He was a smart little thing, but she supposed that he liked to hear her read it. He still insisted on bedtime stories, despite having the books all well memorized. She didn't mind too much; she knew there'd come a day when he didn't want her attention as much.

When they'd arrived back home, Elizabeth was surprised when John didn't drop right down in front of the television again. Instead, he retreated to his room to play, and she left him to his devices while she set to thawing the chicken that she intended to cook for dinner. About an hour after that, the phone rang.

"John, come say hi to your dad!" she called. He darted out of his bedroom and climbed up the couch, over Elizabeth while simultaneously

grabbing for the phone.

"Hey dad!" he cheered. She let them talk while she got up to finish her preparations for dinner, warning him not to hang up. When he'd finished with telling his dad about their day, he handed the phone back to her and sat down at the table, watching on expectantly as she finished the final touches of the meal.

He was mostly quiet through dinner, which was to be expected. He always got a little introspective after talking with Shane, if that was the right word for it. She knew he disliked how much time they were always gone, but he never complained much. It was to be expected; they were a military family, and as such, things of that nature just sort of happened and you either accepted them or you spent your time being very unhappy with the order of things.

When he didn't ask her to read him a story that night as she tucked him in, Elizabeth felt a pinprick of fear climb back up into her chest. "You sure?" she prodded.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm tired." He held her gaze, then nestled down into his blankets. "Big day," he yawned.

"Okay," she said, the word sounding as unsure as she felt. "Give me a kiss, then." She leaned down and pecked him on the cheek, receiving her own in return.

"Love you, momma," he said automatically.

"And I love you," she promised. "More than anything in the whole world."

"In the whole world?" he asked.

Elizabeth felt a rush of fear surge through her like nothing she'd ever felt before, not even when under heavy fire during a skirmish. "In the whole world," she whispered, unwilling to let her fear translate into her voice. "Good night."

She turned his light off and shut his door most of the way like she always did, then went into her bedroom. She paced the length of the floor while simultaneously wringing her hands, and when she couldn't calm herself, she dropped down onto the oversized bed and let out a trembling breath.

She had made it her life's work to know everything about her son. Where he was every second of the day, and how he felt every second of the day. She knew the difference between normal silence and the silence that doing things he shouldn't brought, and she knew the difference between sneezing because of a dust mote and sneezing because he was sick. She knew his routines like she knew herself, and she knew that he was every bit as obsessive as she was about the way those routines were completed.

There was only one reason why their "I love you" routine was out of whack, and it wasn't because he was tired, or lazy, or because he was outgrowing it. It was because that boy in that bed was not Jonathan Andrew Force. She knew that the thought sounded crazy as soon as she thought it, and she passed a shaking hand through her hair as she tried to rationalize the situation and talk herself out of whatever

worried state she'd put herself in, but her intuition had never been wrong before, and that intuition now told â€" no, _screamed_, only one thing in her mind, over and over again.

That was not her son.

4. 03: Chapter 3

Elizabeth let the days go in and out, and slowly she began to distance herself from the boy who looked like John and spoke like John but _wasn't_ John. She'd told Lisa a myriad of different excuses as to why they couldn't make playdates â€" he wasn't feeling well, they already had plans, he'd been bad. She couldn't find a way to explain to her best friend that the her son _wasn't_ her son. He was like some sort of clone, or twin, or something, but it wasn't him.

She knew how crazy it sounded. She'd been doing her own research on the matter as quietly and as secretively as she could, and there were always conspiratorial whispers about how the government was involved in this or that, but she couldn't find any reason to rightly justify why she felt like the boy who slept in John's bed every night wasn't John.

Not until _it_ happened.

They had been sitting outside and the mail had come. John was blowing bubbles and being generally amused by himself while Elizabeth sat on, watching him like a hawk. Her blue eyes were sharpened to his every movement, studying them for differences in what she knew to already be. It was as though he were flawless, and except for the one mistake he'd made in routine, there had never been any other sort of evidence to support her theory. Nothing, of course, except for that voice in her head that told her that he wasn't _right_ somehow.

She managed to fake it to the point where even Shane couldn't tell. He was inside at the moment cooking dinner. It was Saturday, the day the mail came late, and John had asked to go outside. He was expecting a package from Shane's parents as an early birthday present, and Shane had mistakenly mentioned it a few days prior. Every day he asked to go outside and wait for the mail, and they obliged. Elizabeth always sat outside with him, scrutinizing every microscopic detail of him. Her heart ached as the days had passed since she'd began feeling like he was some sort of evil twin. Her own son, _her_ John, could sense emotion in a way that made it seem as though it were as obvious a thing as the difference between a light in a room being either on or off. This boy had no idea; had never once asked her during those moments where they sat by each other on the couch why she was so tense.

It was NOT her son.

The mail truck came down the road, and John shot up like a rocket. "It's here!" he cried. He sounded so sure that it was, too. Elizabeth watched on with her impassive gaze as the mail man pulled a small white package from the stack and held it out towards John.

"Looks like it's for you, little man!" he called happily.

"It's my lucky day!" John sang. He jumped off the porch and ran for the mailman. In an instant, he was on the ground.

"Oh no!" the mailman called. "Looks like he caught his foot up in the grass," he said. He got out of his truck to help the boy up, and then jerked back suddenly.

Elizabeth felt her blood run cold. "John?" she tested.

Nothing.

"SHANE!" she screamed, the panic from the last few months erupting into total madness in her voice. "SHANE!" She ran off the porch so fast that she couldn't even understand what she was doing until she had done it, and before she realized what was happening, she was on her knees in the dewy, freshly watered grass of their front yard. She put a hand on John's shoulder.

"John?" she said, trying to smooth her shaking voice over. She couldn't, and when she felt no response, she leaned in to check for a pulse.

Nothing.

"JOHN!" she screeched.

Shane came out of the front door so quickly that the screen banged against the side of the house, leaving a mark in the paint. He literally slid to Elizabeth's side, grabbing the lanky frame of his son and holding it up. He shook him. "Come on buddy," he muttered to himself, putting him on his back. He began trying to resuscitate him, each time urging him on with the chant of, "Come on, buddy."

Nothing.

"COME ON, BUDDY!"

Nothing.

"Shane... Shane, stop," she whispered. "He's dead."

5. 04: The Present

"_What are you dreaming in there?_"

Oblivious to the things that Cortana wondered, John slept. Four years, seven months, ten days, and a handful of minutes. Cryostasis wasn't like normal sleep; it was like a haze or a fog that seemed endless until one day you just fell forward onto your hands and knees and coughed for as long as it took for your lungs to understand what a sharp breath really felt like again. He barely remembered normal sleep, these days. He felt like a machine. He didn't hate the fact, nor did he like it; he was indifferent to it. He felt indifferent often as the days passed by.

In that haze, however, dream he did. Sierra One One Seven did not dream like normal humans, nor did he dream like normal Spartans, from

the few conversations he'd been willing to have on the matter with Kelly. She had often teased that he had dreamed up something awfully embarrassing to make him not want to discuss it, but John didn't discuss what went on inside his head much for a reason that had nothing to do with humour. So many people knew him by his title and by his deeds that any amount of individual personality that could seep in would somehow taint that; their hopes, their dreams, and their faith in him. Things he needed to survive.

Sierra Zero Eight Seven could understand why he felt this way. Kelly just didn't offer her opinion on the matter. For those reasons, neither Sierra One One Seven nor John brought it up, instead shrugging off her teasing as friendly badgering. Kelly had her own name to live up to, and the more she had made it for herself, the more the teasing had lessened. Finally.

Oblivious to the things that Cortana said and did, John wandered the halls of his mind, each scene replaying like a flickering channel on a television, up only for a moment and then lost to static as the signal faded away. It was like a thought just on the tip of your tongue for all of eternity. It was maddening. And he was stuck in that maddening, hazy loop for four years, seven months, ten days, and a handful of minutes.

There were a few things that he could remember; things he always remembered from his dreams. Things that he couldn't determine the truth of, and they worried at him like a dog with a flea-ridden tail. A glimpse of long, glossy brown hair. Brilliant blue eyes. The scent of coffee, which, for some reason, he found revolting. Most of all, a phrase.

"In the whole world â€" In the whole galaxy â€" in the whole universe."

What did it mean?

It plagued him more than the rest, and he wished with all of his might that he could find that thought that he was ever searching for, but all the luck in the world wouldn't give him his answer.

It worried away at him for four years, seven months, ten days, and a handful of minutes.

But then he heard a soft voice say, "I need you," and suddenly he was falling forward on his hands and knees and his lungs filled with sharp breaths as he reconnected with the conscious world. In the whole world, in the whole galaxy, in the whole universe wasn't a mystery phrase to him anymore, because it had become his life: his duty to protect those things. And Cortana needed him.

6. 05: Chapter 5

Elizabeth Force was twenty-seven and she had just buried her child. Not her child, but a thing that looked like and talked like and laughed like and even sounded like her child, but it was not her son in that casket. The tears she cried were very real, however terrified and suspicious she'd been, but not because the not-John was dead. It was because she understood that she would very likely never see her own son again. Perhaps if the not-John had grown she would

have had time to prove it somehow, but now with whoever that was being lowered into the earth gone from the mortal coil, anything she said or did would make her look like a hysterical, grieving mother who couldn't cope with the loss of her child.

To say that Elizabeth could not cope with death was to say that the rings of Saturn were not beautiful. Elizabeth was strong, stronger than she looked, and she understood the universe in a way that others could not. Lisa often mused that it was where John got his intelligent nature from; Elizabeth had suffered many losses in her life, especially in times of war, and she had never failed to wake up the next day and put to feet on the ground and move forward, regardless of the cost. She said that the lives of those left behind only helped her move further ahead, and it would be a crime to use their gifts as a means of moving backward.

She sat at her kitchen table in the dark, a small red apple in her hands. She echoed her own words over and over in her head, trying to find the strength to move forward, but in this case, she couldn't justify it. Her son, her real son, was out there somewhere. She would know it if he died, she would feel it in her bones. But how? How could she convince someone that she wasn't lying? She had nowhere to turn to " whoever had orchestrated this had made sure of that. She couldn't imagine anyone who would want to hurt her so badly, or what anyone could want with her darling boy, that would make them resort to... this.

The phone rang and it scared her. The apple fell out of her hand and rolled across the table, where it remained, further ignored. She pushed out of the chair and went to the phone on the kitchen counter, wiping tears away from her eyes.

"El.. Elizabeth?" came the request. The voice was scared, small, and barely above a whisper.

"Lisa?" Elizabeth asked, switching her gears from grief to worry in a second. "What's wrong?"

"I... I don't know," Lisa admitted. She was still whispering, and in the background she could hear her moving throughout her home " Lisa's floors were hardwood, and she could hear her footsteps, however soft, betraying Lisa's rapid pace as she went from her own bedroom and out through the front door. Once outside, she could hear the soft chirp of crickets while the rain

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat. She felt her back touch the wall of the dining room, and she slid down to her rear, knees tucked up to her chest. She waited for Lisa to continue, but she was quiet for a long time. All Elizabeth could hear was the shallow, shaking breaths she took as she tried to calm herself down and failed.

"There's something wrong with him," she whispered. The way she said it made it sound like she couldn't believe that she was saying it, and she hesitated, almost like she was going to continue. Finally, she spoke again. "There's something wrong with Colby." It was like she was saying it aloud for the first time, and she fell into a scared, tense sort of silence that was palpable.

"What?" Elizabeth said, her own voice much sharper than she intended

it to be. She could hear Lisa start to apologize and had to shush her. "It's fine, Lisa, it's fine," she said, stopping Lisa before she could explain again how sorry she was for her loss. She was tired of people being sorry for her loss; her son wasn't _dead_. He was out there somewhere, and she would find him, but at the moment, she had a bigger problem on her hands. Whatever had happened to John was happening to Colby, and Elizabeth knew what might come next.

She licked her lips and pressed them together, trying to buy herself a little time to think. Finally, she said only, "Tell me what's happening."

Lisa breathed a sigh of relief, like she was so scared that her friend wouldn't have believed her that she literally couldn't inhale until she had her support. She closed her own eyes tightly, huddled at the far end of her front porch under a long sweater. Her feet were bare and hurt from the cold that the night brought, but she was numb to the pain as she tried to explain herself to her best friend.

"I don't know how to rationalize why I feel this way," she said, her voice laden with confusion and pain. "It's been happening over the last few days. He just woke up one morning and he was _different_. I can't explain it any more than that, it's just..."

"It's just the way he feels," she finished for Lisa. Elizabeth sighed heavily, feeling a pang of guilt for the relief she felt at knowing that she wasn't crazy. She shouldn't have been happy that this was happening again, because she was afraid that the next step was death, but she felt like it gave her a better chance of finding her son " and now, Lisa's too.

"Yeah," Lisa said. "How'd.. you know?"

"I think we have some things to talk about," Elizabeth said. "But not on the phone. Tomorrow after Colby goes to school, I'll meet you at the range. I'll tell you everything I know." She paused. "And Lisa? Don't say anything to anyone else. Don't even let on that you know. I have a feeling that something is happening way above our paygrade, here."

She said her goodbyes with her friend and set the phone down next to her, scrubbing her face with her hands. She needed to get her head together, and she knew it. She couldn't let herself be consumed by fear or pain; if she could hang on to the idea that her son was alive somewhere, then she might be able to see this through. She didn't know what she would do or how she would do it, but if she could get Lisa on board, she knew between the two of them they could do enough digging to at least give her even the smallest foothold she'd need.

7. 06: Chapter 6

Lisa met Elizabeth at the outdoor shooting range they frequented when they wanted to blow off steam. The day was overcast and the clouds hung low, like some sort of sign of things to come. They matched Elizabeth's mood fairly well, however, and probably Lisa's too. Elizabeth knew that shooting would help Lisa to focus " it would help _her_, too, to be honest, and at the moment she felt like they both needed a little bit of grounding.

Lisa sat down on the long bench where their gear was laid out, watching as Elizabeth loaded each bullet into the extra magazines she'd brought. Colby would be in school for a few hours, and that had bought her enough time to get out and try sorting her head out. She was scared, but moreover, she was angry. She couldn't help feeling like someone had done something to her son, to her. How could someone be so cruel?

"I didn't want to say anything to anyone because I thought I was going crazy," Elizabeth said. She had a fire in her eyes that Lisa hadn't seen in a few years, one she held only when she was about to do something incredibly dangerous. "It happened that day we went to the park. I took him to the museum after, and then at home, everything was fine â€" or so I thought. When I put him to bed, he just did something... weird. He broke a routine that he's never broken before, and it wasn't just him growing up and deciding not to. It was like he wasn't aware he was doing it."

Lisa nodded, finally making a move to help her friend. She picked up one of the black magazines and began pulling bullets from their holders one at a time, sliding them nimbly into place. She tried to concentrate on them in her hands; the cold of the lead against her palm, the way that her thumb slid across each one after it clicked into place, one on top of the other.

"John was â€" John is very intuitive," she said, correcting herself with a slight jerk of her head as she spoke. "He could read me like a book, and for some reason, he'd somehow lost the ability. At first I told myself that I was making it up in my mind, but as the days passed, I began testing him. Little things. He always knew when I would lie to him, always, so that's what I did. Even the most simple things he'd normally call me out on just passed right over him. He couldn't tell when I was upset or scared or tired..." she trailed off.

"John always knew when you were bothered. He knew before you did," Lisa said, her tongue feeling heavy as she tried to wrap her head around what Elizabeth was telling her. "It was like a magic trick."

"But the biggest thing that told me something was wrong was just... his eyes. They were..." she trailed off, searching for the right way to describe what she had seen when she gazed into the imposter's eyes.

"Empty?" Lisa offered, her brows perking as she contributed her thoughts. When Elizabeth nodded, Lisa brushed a strand of blonde hair from her eyes and set the magazine down. She'd just been running her thumb over the last of the bullets she'd loaded, over and over again, and she'd finally realized it.

"Yeah," the brunette said slowly. "Empty. He was a perfect replica in so many ways â€" so much that even Shane couldn't tell. But I just.. knew," she said, her eyes widening a little for emphasis. She looked up at Lisa and frowned. "I know it sounds so crazy, and after he died, I felt like maybe I was wrong and I'd just been sensing his death impending and couldn't quite suss it out, but Lisa, I know my son, and that thing that we buried wasn't him."

"So you think he's still out there?" Lisa asked softly. What Elizabeth was describing was exactly what was happening in her own house, to the detail. Colby didn't behave any differently, and it wasn't anything exactly out of character that he said or did " it was just... when she looked at him, when she looked into his eyes, it was like she suddenly didn't recognize him. If there was even a shred of hope that she could find her real son, she would take it.

"I do," Elizabeth said. "And I think Colby is, too. Maybe they're even together. My best guess is that thing that I buried was a clone. I've seen some classified things before, and I know that somewhere someone probably has the budget and the knowledge to do it. What I want to know is why."

Lisa shifted so that her back was centered on the wooden pillar that ran through the structure to support the roof. She watched her friend with her gray eyes, trying to determine if she believed her or not. She'd known Elizabeth for a long time " going on seven years, at that point, but she'd known of her longer. Shane may have formally introduced the two, but that didn't mean that Lisa hadn't been keen on Elizabeth's reputation at the academy when she'd gone. They called her a lot of different names " the Dentist was one (because she had a habit of hitting people so hard that she knocked their teeth out), but the one that really stuck out right then was the monicker she already wore: Force.

"What do you think we can do about it? If someone's really cloning kids and snatching ours, they're probably the type to cover their own ass pretty well," Lisa said. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we are only two people." She hated that she had to point that out, because it made it sound like she didn't care. She did. She just didn't think she could do anything without getting herself, or her son, killed for real.

Elizabeth looked at her with those brilliant, bright blue eyes, and then looked back down range. She slid a magazine into her M6D pistol, then racked the slide with a fluid motion. "I'll understand if you don't want anything to do with this, Lisa, but I can't stop. I am going to find my son." And with that, she unloaded her magazine into the target, her friend watching on as the .40 rounds ripped the wood into pieces.

8. 07: Chapter 7

"She's made contact," a female voice said. Justin Stark glanced up from his desk, nearly knocking over a cup of coffee that he'd made and forgotten about several hours before. He frowned, looking up at the doctor who loomed in his doorway, clutching files to the breast of her white coat.

"I knew she'd be a problem," Halsey muttered. She sighed and regarded the other scientist. "What happened, exactly?" she asked, finally pushing off of the door and coming further into his office. She dropped into the chair in front of his desk, looking tired for a moment.

"It sounds like she's pretty certain that Clone 117 wasn't really her son," he said, clicking his tongue sadly. "She made contact with Lima-2 about him." He paused. There were way too many clones and

plants around the planet for his liking. Some of them had been test subjects introduced just to see if they could load someone's memories in so completely, but Lima-2 was an older model. She had been cloned for her superior marksmanship while in the academy under the pretenses of DNA sampling and then again after she'd died in combat. It had been a favour for her father, a figurehead of ONI. It was Lima-2 who had initially lead them to John 117, but it was when Halsey had interviewed him during a routine checkup that she met his mother and decided that he had a potential candidacy based on lineage.

Oddly enough, Elizabeth Force had been on the grab list for a while " since she had been in the academy. They just hadn't been able to get the funding for it, and now that Halsey was actually in charge of a program, Force was far too old. Lima-2 was only supposed to have had one copy of herself; if her father hadn't have pulled the strings he had, she would have died in a skirmish on a border planet before her son would have ever been born and before she'd formally been introduced to Elizabeth. They'd used the clone they had with her imprinted memories from just before the deployment, filling her file with a medical amnesia from a car accident to explain the loss of time. Lima-2 didn't know any of this, of course " as far as Lima-2 knew, she was Lisa Warren. Her thoughts and memories and feelings were her own, and unless her handler stepped in to contain her, she would continue on her path.

"How is he?" Stark asked, spinning back and forth in his chair to try and keep moving. He was so tired. He'd been in his office for two days straight trying to get all of his notes together. He had never had any idea that his degree would have brought him to this line of work; especially not discussing the turmoil that a person was suffering because of their hands directly.

"He's..." she trailed off. He was difficult. They had been debating on trying to augment his memories, but she was afraid that they could do damage to things they wanted to keep; he had been chosen for a reason. "Force is definitely his mother," she finally settled on. She couldn't believe that she was only slightly older than her, to be honest. "He'll need work."

"Have you reconsidered the neurological reconstruction again?" he asked, scrubbing his face with his hands and sitting back in his chair finally. He resisted the urge to swing his feet up on his desk.

"Absolutely not," she insisted. "He's difficult, but he's not unmanageable. That stuff reacts poorly to children; we could risk wiping him out completely. I don't want to take those memories from him, anyways. Force is a point of strength from him. She's nurtured his natural abilities, and she raised him to be tough. I'll find a way in, I know I will. Forcing it will be unfavourable in the end, I think."

Justin nodded. "Unfavourable indeed. Kid's eyes are like ice. Cuts right through me when I do diagnostics. He's terse, too. Holding it in like he thinks he's a hostage and he's trying not to give any information up. He's too damn smart for his own good."

"That's exactly why I want him to stay like he is," Catherine concluded. She smiled fondly as they spoke of John; he was by far one

of her favourite recruits. "But do keep an eye on Force. Make sure you have Lima-2 called in for a quick wipe with her handler. Colby is due to expire in a few more days, so I'm fairly certain if we get to her before then, Force will do damage on her own."

Halsey fell quiet. She had other things to deal with besides worrying about what John's mother would try and do. Lima-2 would forget she ever spoke with her, lose her own child, then when Elizabeth confronted her about taking action, Lima-2 " Lisa, that is " would probably attempt to have her committed. She'd certainly lose her position within the UNSC if she pursued it.

"Do you think that will be enough?" Justin asked, raising his eyebrows as Halsey fell into a thoughtful silence.

"Let's hope so. The alternatives are worse." If she pursued it to the point where it got to be a problem, ONI would no doubt use persuasion to compel Elizabeth's silence. Their version of persuasion came in the form of a 12.7x40mm M225 SAPHE, and Halsey didn't particularly want to have to have the knowledge of Force's fate on her conscience when she was seeing her son on a daily basis. Her job was already hard enough as it was.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. "I'm sorry, Doctor Halsey, Doctor Stark? Daisy-023 is on the loose again. She got out of her room and she's currently hiding somewhere in the basement level. We lost her after she took one of the trainers out at the knee. Vicious little shit," he muttered.

Halsey sighed and closed her eyes. "Stark... just keep me posted on the Force situation. I need to go collect a certain little girl who won't be very happy to see me," she said with a sigh. She stood up and threw the files at his desk, then made a gesture to the man at the door. "Lead the way," she instructed him.

9. 08: Chapter 8

On what would have been John's seventh birthday, Elizabeth Force was committed to a mental hospital. Shane had filed for separation after he realized that his wife was holding onto the idea that their son was still alive and had been spirited away by some clandestine aspect of the military. It had all gone down hill since she and Lisa had stopped communicating. As far as he had been told, Elizabeth had just pushed too many of her buttons after Colby's death, but he was fairly certain that Lisa left a lot out of what she relayed to him for the sake of minimalizing the damage between their already-shaky marriage.

Elizabeth spent most of her days drugged up, otherwise she was completely unmanageable. She was too strong and had too much training for them to just let her wander around the ward, and she'd already beaten the living shit out of more than one of the guards who had tried to detain her. They weren't taking anymore chances after that. She currently sat by the window, knees drawn up to her chest. She counted on her fingers while talking softly to herself, though it was unclear what she was saying.

There was a knock at the door and she jerked her head up, blue eyes focusing on the steel as the viewing slat moved open. "You have a

visitor," a the nurse's voice said. "Stand in the circle and we'll come in to retrieve you."

Elizabeth stood up and moved to the spot in her room where she was to stand when she was being restrained. She sighed, blowing strands of her long, dark hair out of her face, and looked up. Her foot began to tap violently as she held her hands behind her back, waiting for the familiar cold feel of the restraints. She was surprised when they shackled her instead; she'd gotten those a lot when she'd first been admitted, but in the last month or so she was down to handcuffs. What was going on?

She was lead down the halls of the dimly lit facility, her drug-addled mind attempting to take in as much about the path she was following as she could. It was hard to fight through the fog, but her lips moved gently in silent words as she burned the images of her route into her mind for later use. They stopped her at the door, and the guard went to a keypad and pressed in a code. She watched his fingers like a hawk, gritting her teeth when a retinal scan followed. No coming this way on my own, she thought to herself wistfully.

"This way," he said, his tone tight. She noticed that everyone in her entourage was standing up straight, their posture and movements more rigid than usual. There was always a sense of alertness when Force was concerned, but this was something new. She was also keenly aware that she had two more people behind her rather than her usual escort. What was going on?

She passed through the chain-link fence at the apparent end of her tour, coming to pause by another steel door. It opened into what she could only identify as a sort of interview room. Inside there sat a man that she struggled to recognize. She knew she knew him from somewhere, but she couldn't put her finger on where, or how, or why. The drugs clouded her memories to the point where only the brightest stood out most of the time, and those she reserved for her son. John.

"You can leave us," the man said as he stood. He directed Elizabeth to sit down in the chair across the table from him. When the guards seemed reluctant to do so, the man only cleared his throat. "This is all classified information, sirs. I'm sorry, but you simply can't be in this room. I'll buzz you as soon as I need you," he assured them. They left.

Elizabeth stared at him, sitting into the chair and finding herself feeling rather numb to the experience she was having. "Do I know you?" she asked. She tilted her head, eyes narrowing as she tried to study his face. It was like a thought that was just on the tip of her tongue, and the sensation made her brain itch.

"You'll remember me sooner or later," he said softly. "But for my sake, I hope it's much later. I will only tell you that your presence in this hospital is deliberate, and that you will have an opportunity to leave here very soon."

Elizabeth was scary silent as she regarded him, and for a moment she felt his face click into place. He had warned her that it would be better if she didn't know who he was, and so she made no mention of her sudden epiphany. "How soon?" she asked, her eyes fixed on him in

a predatory manner.

"Tonight," he said softly. "Take these now. They're slow releasing. By the time lights out rolls around, you'll be totally lucid. I've got two people here on the inside that are going to get you out. From there, you'll head to a rendezvous with a waiting shuttle. We need to get you off planet before they know you're gone, and we need you prepped and ready to go."

She watched as he slid two small red capsules across the table toward her. Slowly, she reached up, the clank of the chains scrubbing against the table as she took them. She popped them into her mouth and swallowed, ignoring the scratch of the pills as they slid down her throat with no water to guide them.

"I know you probably have a lot of questions, and unfortunately I can't give you any answers right now," he said, his voice less neutral and more... guilty. "I can only tell you that in about five hours, you will be one step closer to getting your son back."

Elizabeth's eyes widened as he dropped that bomb on her, and he stood briskly, checking his watch. "I need to go. The two people in here are trained for extraction, and they will get you out to the best of their ability. They will give you coordinates for the exit shuttle, but their presence isn't mandatory for you to get on board." He paused. "You do what you have to do to get to that shuttle as quickly and as quietly as possible, Force. That's an order."

"Understood," she said softly.

The man punched the buzzer that signaled the guards to the end of their meeting, and the door opened. Elizabeth remained perfectly still in her chair as he passed her by, and he gave her a reassuring look. She focused her eyes straight ahead, as though he wasn't even in the room, and allowed herself to be lifted out of the chair by the escorts.

"Come on, Force," one of the men said, hefting her to a standing position. "Let's get you back to your room."

10. 09: The Present

"What on _Earth_ is this?"

Cortana had found something interesting. At least, she thought it was. Of course, John was still in cryostasis, so it wasn't as though she could really share it with him, and honestly, after reading through the files, she wasn't sure if she wanted to.

Why had she not known about this?

A quick search of her records indicated that the information wasn't there. It wasn't stricken or deleted in the sense that she could see the ghost of it across the mainframe â€" it was altered to the point as though it had been made to never have existed. She felt what could only be described as discontentment as she scanned more information about what she'd seen. It was almost like a glitch â€" a string of keystrokes, a row of code â€" someone had attempted to remove

official records. They had attempted to hide something from someone, and as a result, from _her_.

The lights around the ship flickered from blue to red as a spark of anger flashed through her. She didn't like secrets.

"Search all files on Force, Elizabeth," she commanded.

Who is trying to hide you from me?

****Search error. Contents not found.****

"Hm," was all she said. "So you want to play hard to get, huh?"

"Search all images, Last Name: Force," she tried.

Bingo.

A photo appeared of a woman in an academy uniform. Her long hair was brown, almost to the point of being black. She had a wide smile with freckles splashed across her cheeks and nose. Her eyes were a true shade of blue, the colour of Cortana's own, and she found them pleasant to look at â€" she found _her_ pleasant to look at. In the photo she was standing amidst other people, all of them smiling and laughing. Below the photo was a caption.

****Elizabeth Force, seventeen, leads Red Team to victory in the annual Capture the Flag match.****

"_Who_ are you?" she mused to herself. "And why are you hiding from me?"

"Search all images, Facial Recognition," she commanded, feeling excitement. She loved it when she beat the system.

Several other photos popped up. She read the captions and surveyed the pictures.

****Elizabeth Force, twenty-one, and Lisa Warren, twenty, participating in the mentoring program at the local shooting range. Lisa Warren (left) is one of the youngest decorated marksmen in UNSC history, with a 99.7% accuracy average since her shooting career began at age sixteen.****

"Good for you, Lisa," Cortana said. She flipped to the next photo.

****Elizabeth Force, twenty-three, and her two year old son, John, welcome home husband and father**, **Third Class Shane DiLaurentis, home from his tour.****

Cortana couldn't help but smile at the photo. "Lovely family," she remarked. She lingered on the image for a few extra moments, studying the faces of mother and son. "He does have your eyes, miss," she observed. She flipped to the next photo.

****Elizabeth Force, twenty-seven, stands over the grave of her son, Jonathan Andrew. Authorities state that her son died suddenly due to an unseen neurological flaw. Scientists in the colony are now**

implementing more frequent screening procedures to eliminate the chances of another tragedy. **

"Oh... oh my," she said, her voice tensing. "This isn't good at all." She was suddenly thankful for the Chief's hibernation. She needed time to do more digging, and she wasn't certain that she'd like what she found, but she knew that he wouldn't like it at all.

11. 10: Escape

It was close to eleven in the evening when Elizabeth felt the clarity of her consciousness return to her. She had been laying in bed awake for several hours beyond the designated bedtime set by her doctor. All she could think about was what lay before her. She had been given what seemed to be a chance to reclaim her child, and despite it being almost too good to be true, she knew the man who had come to visit her, and she knew what power he held in scientific and military circles. She didn't think him a liar, when it came down to it.

As it turned out, he had not deigned to make a liar out of himself, either.

There was a soft scuffling sound at her door, and something moved beneath it. She could see the metallic glint in the sliver of pale moonlight that illuminated her room. She slid off of her bed after a moment of silence, then swiftly moved across her room to examine it. It was a key. For a few more minutes, she did nothing, then finally decided that she couldn't come up with a better plan before first knowing what theirs was. Elizabeth used it quickly, opening the door to find one of the extra men who had escorted her earlier.

"This way," he said. "Keep low and quiet."

Elizabeth just looked at him for a long moment, as though she was debating on whether to trust him. It wasn't until she saw the glint of a dogtag beneath his shirt that she felt a little of the tension wear between her shoulders. "Why are you helping me?" she asked softly, falling into step just at the edge of his shadow.

He gave her no answer as they walked, holding his hand up and making a fist as they came to a four-way intersection within the more fortified part of the ward. Elizabeth froze in place, so eerily still that she seemed to have been turned to stone. When he nodded to her to continue, his eyebrows peaked ever so slightly at her ability to become a ghost.

When they got beyond the last heavy-duty set of doors, he turned. "You'll have to make the rest on your own. Your next contact is a quarter mile out in the woods. All I can give you for now is this," he explained, handing her a small watch. She tightened it down on her wrist and looked at it. It seemed to be some sort of tracking monitor.

"He'll be at that point. From there, he'll get you off planet. You need to move as quickly as possible; if they notice you're missing, they're going to full scale lockdown, and that mean you only get one chance to do this right. There are people that have a vested interest in you never getting out of this place, Force. You need to believe that, if nothing else."

Elizabeth looked at him for a second, and then nodded. She figured that he wouldn't give her any more information than that. "Thank you," she said sincerely, grabbing him by the wrist as he turned to leave. He looked uncomfortable at the contact, and then finally nodded his head once to indicate his acceptance.

With that, Elizabeth turned on her heel and sprinted to the end of the hall, disappearing around the corner as she made her way to the exit. She got as far as the second floor before the alarms went off, and she realized that someone must have made an unscheduled visit to her room. She had ducked into a darkened alcove and tried to decide whether or not she wanted to make a run for it or try and continue to sneak around when two guards ran past her — two armed guards.

Shit, she thought to herself, her eyes widening as she felt a surge of adrenaline run through her. The man had said they'd be on full lockdown, but she couldn't possibly imagine why they'd have guns. True, she'd roughed some of them up and she was considered dangerous, but this hospital wasn't that sort of place. Violence was generally frowned upon in all forms — a guard had been caught hitting a patient once who had a history of being difficult and he'd been punished to the letter of the law.

The warning the man had given her rang through her head. There are people who have a vested interest in you never getting out of this place, Force. But why? Had she truly stumbled upon some sort of conspiracy? The man who'd come to see her, the one she recognized from a few years prior, told her she'd be closer to getting her son back. It had to mean that she had been on the right path before she'd been committed. She was always sure, but this was proof.

She finally decided that she had waited long enough, and darted from the alcove to an empty office that was only about ten or so feet down and on the other side of the hall. If she timed it just right, she could run out and go right through the open door. She counted to three, and ran for it.

As soon as she stepped into the hall, she regretted her decision. There was someone standing just down the end of the path, and he opened fire on her. The alarms went off at the same time, and all of the normal lights went dark. The emergency lights switched on, bathing everything in a red glow, and the muzzle flare was her only indication of where he was. She ducked as quickly as possible and slid into the open office, the bullet glancing off the frame of the door and splintering a chunk of wood off in all directions.

She managed not to cry out, instead running into the office and dropping down behind the desk. Footsteps drew nearer to her and she could see the booted feet in the doorway from her vantage point. She was effectively pinned down, with no exit. Shit. Just as she was trying to put a plan together, there was another shot and the body of the first man dropped to the floor. She kicked the chair out of her way and scrambled out from under the desk, catching an object as it was thrown at her. The cold steel of the object told her it was a gun, and she gripped it firmly in her hand.

"I'll hold them off. Force, you had better be worth all of the trouble Stark as me going through. Follow the HUD on the watch, and

get out of here. And Elizabeth? Good luck, soldier." He drew near and pressed something into her hand â€" her dogtags. "Scan these when you get to the shuttle. You're the only one authorized to operate it."

"Why are you doing this?" she demanded again.

He looked at her, then smiled a little. "If I were ever in your son's position, I'd hope to god I had a mother like you to fight for me. Now go. I'll do what I can from here. Keep your head down, and don't look back."

She nodded, then took off down the hall. She knew this part of the hospital because she'd been in there pre-drugging, but there had never been people trying to kill her before when she'd been there. It was a little more difficult to navigate between trying to avoid getting her head blown off and attempting to not shoot people, but after a bullet nicked her upper arm, she realized that getting out without doing some damage was out of the question.

She didn't have to wonder if her aim had withered over time; the first shoot she took was direct to center mass. She jumped over the man as he fell to the floor, kicking his gun away as she landed on the other side of him. No use in chancing him getting a last ditch surge of energy and shooting her in the back, was there? She continued on, shooting two more just before she rounded the corner to the exit. She slid to a halt as she realized there were several people posted at the door, jerking back behind the corner before she nearly got her head taken off.

She dropped the magazine out of the gun and counted four rounds, plus one in the chamber. Not good. She'd have to improvise. She turned and scanned the area wildly, then focused on an oxygen tank. She knew it wouldn't explode because she remembered Lisa detailing a list of things that she'd shot to make holes in the ground, and she'd been thoroughly disappointed when she'd found that list to be short. However, most people didn't know that, and Elizabeth was banking on the security at the ward being in that group.

She grabbed it with great conviction, thankful that it wasn't as big as it could have been, and with all her might, hefted it out and at the group guarding the door. She ran out directly after it, shooting at it and flinching as bullets kicked off the side. Sure enough, everyone ran for cover, giving her the opening she needed. She prayed she still had luck on her side, and broke out into a run for the door.

12. 11: Escape

She ran through the woods like a frightened gazelle, ducking every so often to avoid search lights. She knew that they had sent another team out to fan the woods and search for her, and these ones were military. She could tell by the signature percussion of the rifles when fired: MA5B. Damn. She didn't want to be on the receiving end of those at all.

She glanced down at her HUD and swore to herself; in her quest to evade, she'd run quite a distance in the wrong direction. The good thing was that she had mostly successfully put herself out of range

of the automatic weapons, but she'd have to double-back now, and that was just more time she was going to spend running back towards the team sweeping the woods.

She reached into the white tanktop that she wore, fingers clasping her dog tags. She was colder than hell " she'd been broken out wearing her sleeping clothing, which was only a pair of cotton pajama pants and the aforementioned shirt. It did nothing for her temperature, and white even less for her cover. She was trying to stay as low to the ground as possible as she ran back around to where the shuttle was, but she hadn't accounted for what was about to happen.

As she checked the HUD again and estimated her arrival time, there was a loud pop. A split second later, she was deaf and the trees in front of her hiding spot had exploded into flames. "They have a grenade launcher!" she yelled, not hearing her voice but rather feeling the vibrations her voicebox made as she screamed and ran. _What?!_ This was ridiculous.

She realized that she was severely out-gunned and out-manned, and that her best chance stood at a full sprint to the shuttle. She gripped her tags one more time and whispered her son's name, regardless of her ability to hear, and then ran for it. She was at a dead sprint, her lungs utterly burning from the cold air. It felt like she was being kicked in the chest with every breath she took, and her legs hurt so badly they were starting to shake, but it didn't matter. None of it mattered.

Just as she felt like she was about to drop, someone sprang up from behind a cluster of bushes. She raised her pistol and fired, but nothing came out " she was out of ammo. She flipped it in her hand, intending to bash the would-be attacker with it, but the man hefted a large weapon onto his shoulder and yelled for her to get back. She couldn't hear it, but she sure understood his mouth, and she leaped away just in time to see the flare from the back of the weapon as he engaged it.

The rocket shot off of the slide and went straight for the groups that were closing in on them. There was a tremendous explosion that rocked the ground; before she had time to think, he fired the secondary rocket, then threw the weapon behind him and made for the open loading door of the shuttle " which wasn't a shuttle at all, but a Pelican that had been painted black and was so close behind her that she felt stupid for not having seen it sooner.

"RUN!" he commanded. _That_ she heard.

She turned and followed him up the ramp, darting for the front while he tried to close the door. She ripped her chain from around her neck and held it under the scanner when it prompted her for the security key, then began flipping switches. She heard the engine hum to life and breathed a sigh of relief as she realized her hearing was coming back to her. Unfortunately, Elizabeth also heard a pained yell as she felt the ramp jerk to a halt. She turned from the seat and realized that a few stragglers had made it past the rockets; the man who'd fired on them had been shot in the chest and was slumped down, his hand clutching the wound.

"Go," he commanded. "I'll handle them." With that, he lurched

forward, smacking the release to close the bay door and slipping between the gap before it closed. She watched in horror as he scattered a few grenades down, then held the last one in his hand. He looked back at her and winked. "Good luck," he mouthed. The door shut.

Horrified, Force stood in place for a moment. She remembered being told that the presence of the two men was not necessary for her to escape, and as much as she regretted it, she had to leave _right then_ or she would risk being shot out of the air. He'd left the rocket launcher out there in the dirt and she was fairly certain she'd seen more rounds on the ground. Those would easily take her out of flight if she wasn't high enough, and with a heavy heart, she made her way back to the controls.

As soon as she lifted out of the clearing, she accelerated as hard as the Pelican would allow, then slumped forward in the seat. A buzzing sound roused her from her weary stupor, and she looked around until she found the button for the comm.

"Force? Force! Force, come in!" a male voice said.

"I'm here!" she cried weakly. "I'm in the air. Out of range of explosives, at least," she added ruefully. "Who is this?"

"Input the coordinates I'm about to give you into your nav," the voice said, ignoring both her comment and her question. "I'll meet you at the rally point. From there it's going to get difficult," he warned.

"You mean that _wasn't_ difficult?" she shot back, wincing as she realized that her arm badly needed to be treated. She reached around until she found a first aid kit and began pulling the contents out as she spoke. "I need time to regroup myself," she said, yanking out the rubbing alcohol and gritting her teeth. That was going to hurt.

"No time," the voice replied. "Regroup on your flight. There's some supplies in there if you can find them â€" first aid, water, a few nutrition bars. Nothing fancy, but it'll keep you going. I'll give you something more when you arrive," he said, though she couldn't really fathom what he meant. "Just relax while you can. You should be here in a few hours, if that."

Elizabeth acknowledged him and slumped back down in the seat. She put the coordinates in and managed to pour alcohol on her arm and wrap it crudely while simultaneously flying the Pelican, but she realized that she was far too tired to try and split her concentration, so her arm would have to wait before she could do much else. If she'd have thought about it, she could have cauterized it, but she hadn't been willing to get close enough to grab one of those rifles just so she could burn herself and add another scar to the ever-growing collection.

She dropped her dog tags back over her head, rubbing her thumb over the UNSC symbol absently. _I'm coming for you, John. I'm coming._

When she arrived to the checkpoint, she landed the Pelican as gracefully as possible " which was, to say the least, not very. To her credit, she didn't hit anything, but the few people that had come to greet her definitely had to scatter as the shaky bird set its feet down. She slipped out of the chair and worked her way to the back, palm slapping the button to lower the rear door. It dropped about halfway down, the last skirmish she'd experienced before she'd escaped having caused quite a bit of damage to it. After a few minutes of contorting, she managed to drop out of the angled piece of steel, falling hard on her side.

The man who had met her in the ward offered her a hand, tightly clasping her wrist as he hefted her up to her feet. She stumbled, finding that he was more than willing to hold onto her to keep her stable, and forced herself to relax her posture.

"Force," he welcomed her warmly, "you look like hell." He smiled as he said it, and she leaned on him for support as he nodded towards the direction they needed to go. "You've just got to make it to the lift, and from there it's not far to the infirmary."

She was out of shock, unfortunately, and as she walked she was keenly aware that her bare feet felt like they were on fire from running through the woods at top speed. She was fairly certain she'd stepped on every rock, thorn, and shell casing as she'd made her dash from the hospital to the Pelican, and there was definitely evidence of that as her dirty footprints began to leave tiny stamps of blood behind her.

"Where are we?" she asked, head still swiveling as the man gently guided her towards the tall structure. They were on what appeared to be a rig just off the coast of a city, though she couldn't tell which one. It was far enough away that she couldn't see any buildings that stood out, and it was no beach that she recognized. The last time she'd even been to a beach was for John's fifth birthday; she and Lisa had taken the boys out for the day and she'd gotten horribly sunburned.

"It was an abandoned laboratory," he answered, catching her arm before she stumbled over a raised reflector just outside of a helicopter landing area. "Careful," he eased. When she seemed stable again, he continued. "It was built up under the water a long time ago, and it's all still pretty much in working condition today."

"What?" she asked, arching her eyebrow at him. "Lab for what?"

He chuckled, knowing she wouldn't like the answer. "DNA research. The facility was in military possession until a few years ago; when they started making headway, they moved it to Reach. A private owner bought the rig with all of the old equipment in it. That's where I came in," he explained. He knew she'd keep asking questions, so he plowed right on. "I'm a scientist, myself. I specialize more in the human physique and how to make it better. This was one of the places that helped the UNSC get their foothold into the art of cloning " but then they got more funding from ONI and they had to move."

She just looked at him when he dropped the c-word, stopping so hard that she caused him to trip over his own feet and teeter off away from her for a moment. "Cloning," she repeated. "So I'm not

crazy."

"Absolutely not," he confirmed. "Listen, Elizabeth. I have had a very large hand in certain advancements that the military has made, but sometimes a scientist can lose sight of their ethics along the way in favour of achieving greatness. I was one of those people who always tried to move on, to push the envelope, but what's happening now... I can't be a part of it anymore." He shook his head.

Elizabeth set her mouth into a firm line. "So I have you to blame?"

He frowned. "I deserved that," he said with a little shake of his head. "But I'm here now, and I'm on your side. I'm going to do everything in my power to help you get your son back â€" but you should know that it's going to be the most difficult thing you've ever done in your life. John is special â€" in more ways than one. Any other candidate for the program and I'd say that you had a snowball's chance in hell of getting them back if you just didn't drop the issue and kept on ONI about it, but John? The team there wouldn't let him go if you held their families at gunpoint. He is essentially their prodigy child, their top subject. Why do you think they've gone to such great lengths to keep you away?"

She stared at him for a long time, and saw guilt in his eyes. "But it can't just be because you don't agree with the program," she insisted. "You could have sounded the alarm to every parent that this happened to, and you didn't. Why me?"

He gestured for her to step onto a lift, then pressed the keypad on the podium; they began to slowly sink beneath the surface of the rig. "Elizabeth..." He let her name trail off into a sigh, passing his hands through his short hair, and looked away.

She stared at him as they fell into an uncomfortable silence, and then it clicked.

"Justin," she said â€" she said it so softly that he almost didn't hear it. "Justin Stark. I remember you," she added, her voice raising as she connected the dots. "You â€" you were at my school. You interviewed me my senior year at the academy, and then again after John was born. You said it was for data collection for the UNSC. Why? Was that even the truth?"

Stark raised his eyebrows. "Oh, boy," he muttered. "Yes, it was the truth â€" in the loosest sense of the word. The cloning projects have been around for a while now, but even more, we've been trying to harness specific talents from people. Your friend Lisa? We harvested her DNA a while ago. Her shooting skill is spectacular â€" almost inhuman. She's a clone, by the way. In fact, the one you knew is the second version of her."

"WHAT?" she choked. She felt nauseous, and immediately grabbed the railing that surrounded the lift as she began to feel lightheaded. She sank to her rear and just hung there, arms effectively wrapped throughout the lowest rung of the metal bright yellow three-rung fence. She looked like a fighter on the ropes, and she felt like it too, actually.

Stark came across the platform and crouched down next to her,

reluctant to disentangle her arms for fear of being hit. He figured he may as well keep talking since it would all come out sooner or later. "Lisa Warren was originally harvested back when she was a teen, and was flash-cloned twice. Once for simple diagnostics; that clone died several weeks in. The second time, we had much better luck, although we had a hefty budget for her clone specifically. Lisa was killed in combat with insurrectionists. Her father, as you know, is very powerful and established within ONI, so he said to spare no expense to resurrect his little girl." He paused, letting that sink in.

"And Colby?" Elizabeth heard herself ask.

"Oh, he was totally real. Her second incarnation, Lima-2, gave birth to Colby and loved him just like a normal person. She is still a human; she's just a copy of herself. All the right memories and functions are still there," he assured her. "But unfortunately, there was a caveat to Lima-2. She had a handler and had to be routinely checked on to ensure that she was still working properly. And Colby was a candidate for the program that your son was taken for because he was the product of a clone with valuable DNA already. We figured, why not? We may as well try and find out what we can."

"So is that why she went totally crazy on me?" she asked, her voice still holding a falsetto to it as she tried to wrap her head around what she was hearing. "One day we were planning to storm the castle, and the next day, it was like she had forgotten all about everything she'd said and felt."

"Oh, definitely. As soon as you made contact her handler brought her in for a quick mental reset. We just back-tracked her a few days, then sent her to a grief counselor who only aggravated her situation to the point where you even mentioning her son's name sent her into a tailspin â€" which, I gathered from the reports in the ward, is exactly what happened. More or less, they knew she'd set you off, and it'd cause you to quit being level-headed. You'd be forced into action, and..." he trailed off.

She sniffled as she felt herself fighting the urge to cry. "And then you'd have an excuse to put me in that place," she finished for him. She couldn't help it. "I just don't understand why â€" why any of this -" She let go of the metal bars and buried her face into her hands.

The lift stopped, but Justin stayed next to her, and put a hand lightly on her shoulder. "Elizabeth," he said softly, "I'm sorry. I know I can't say it enough, but this will be my biggest regret. Most parents didn't even seem to react â€" they did, but it was so run of the mill. When I saw the reports about you, I knew that you'd fight until your last breath to get your son. This will be my biggest regret, and god willing, my biggest achievement. I'm going to do whatever it takes to get John back to you," he said firmly. "I swear it on my life."

"Ma'am?" a tentative voice said. Elizabeth looked up through her tears, nodding to Justin before looking at the woman who had approached the lift. "Come with me, ma'am. Let's get you patched up," she urged. She held her hand out to Elizabeth, who took it after Justin helped her back up.

As she slipped her arm over the woman's shoulder and began to hobble towards the infirmary, she stopped to look back at Stark. "Justin," she called. He stopped what he was doing and met her gaze. She thought his eyes looked watery, but she couldn't be sure through her own blurred vision. She wanted to thank him, but the idea of thanking the man who had a hand in ruining her life flickered across her mind, and she just closed her eyes. He seemed to understand, nodding once to her before she turned and continued down the slope.

14. 13: Keeping Promises

Justin Stark was nervous. He had paced his lab several times over, finally settling back down in his chair. _Was she ready for this?_ He'd spent a month on Elizabeth. What had been a trip to the infirmary to get her patched up had turned out to be so much more: all of the side-research he'd been doing he used to try and get her to the point where she might actually have a chance in infiltrating Reach and taking back her son.

He looked at the monitoring system to find John-117, smiling a little when he saw the boy playing a game of tag with Kelly-087, Frederic-104, and Samuel-034. Kelly was probably the last person he'd have chosen to play tag with; even at age seven she was showing the speed of an animal. He knew the other children tried to avoid her when it came to games of speed and cunning, but they all wanted John to play, and John and Kelly were a package deal. He was protecting her, in a way. Justin was always amazed by how smart John was, and he knew in his heart of hearts that despite returning him to Elizabeth being the right decision, the UNSC would be losing the opportunity for what could be the biggest hero their galaxy could ever know.

But there was someone nipping at his heels, and it wasn't the boy. Elizabeth Force was obviously a sort of ethereal being not of human ilk " or at least, she seemed to be. The treatments Justin had given her had taken in record time. She'd developed enhanced strength, speed, and stamina, while her ability to manipulate her brain to better save her own skin was off the charts. It was much more than he had hoped, or ever thought possible in the body of an adult, but Elizabeth was special, just like her son.

The raid was set to take place in hours, and Justin felt his stomach in knots. He'd placed his own teams inside the building under the guise of interns, using all of the contractor passes he'd ever been allowed in his lifetime in one day. He'd claimed he'd needed them for additional research he was behind on, and Halsey was so over-loaded with her own work that she'd just shrugged him off.

As soon as the children had been put to bed, his plan was set into action. The best part? Elizabeth was going to walk in through the front door. He'd developed something extraordinary in his under-sea lab, something even more amazing than the enhancements he'd performed: it was a cloaking device that made the user all but invisible. There were some glitches as it wasn't entirely perfect, but it was way beyond what technology they were employing in Reach's defenses at the moment, and he was certain it would do the job to get her in. She would be leaving by any means necessary, though Justin had a small ship with the ability to jump on stand-by.

His comm went off in the silence of his office, causing him to jump.

She was there. He watched the cameras pointed towards the front of the base with unflinching eyes; except for a shimmer when she moved too quickly, he couldn't see her at all. The guards on duty certainly didn't see her, and she picked her way around motion-sensitive corridors at low speed to ensure that she wasn't captured for setting them off and calling the rain of fire down upon her.

Once she'd gotten to the part of Reach where the children were kept, she stopped. Justin had to send her the code to get into that section of the facility, and she had to wait for it to come through. This next part had to be done very carefully or else she'd lose her shielding. Justin sent it over and then watched, his knuckles turning white as he gripped his desk.

All at once, Elizabeth popped into view. For some reason, as soon as she'd touched the door to enter the code, there had been a charge sent across her, and it had blown her camouflage. She was totally exposed, and she had _seconds_ before she was spotted. She looked right at the camera, at him, her blue eyes wide with terror. Then something else: determination. She set her jaw, looking back at the door, and pressed in the code as quickly as she could. She began _running_ through the corridor that lead to the children's dorms, not slowing until she nearly passed door 117, at which point she put her booted heel down and slid to a stop. She still wasn't used to her speed, it seemed.

She felt a bolt of fear run through her as she realized that the rooms also had codes on them, and she didn't have the individual one for John's room. She drew her M6D from her thigh rig and flipped it around in her hand, then swung it down against the keypad, blowing the circuitry. The light switched from red to green, and then deafening alarms went off all over the base. The door began to slide open, then started to slam shut, but she leaped in front of it, feeling the weight of the heavy plastic crush down on her back.

John sat up in bed, whipping his head around wildly at the sudden onslaught of noise. When he realized that his _mother_ was in the doorway, he froze, unsure of whether or not he was dreaming. Elizabeth, meanwhile, had managed to put a leg up, and pressed out with her body at all her might, trying to unfold herself. She forced the door back into its slide with a loud bang, causing the foggy plastic to crack in half as she kicked it with everything she had.

"Come on baby, we need to go, _right now_," she informed him, holding her hand out.

John sprang into action immediately, grabbing her hand. He wrapped her into a tight hug suddenly, causing Elizabeth to struggle for air â€” he was stronger than she remembered. Taller, too, come to think of it. "I missed you so much mom," he said into her stomach before pulling away.

"I missed you too," she said, her voice trembling. She never thought she'd ever see him again, and she was being overwhelmed with emotions. She grit her teeth and forced them back down, thankful for the enhancements that Stark had given her. She was good in combat, proof by her record, but this moment may have broken her had she not been ready for it with marginally more self-control than when she was 'normal'. "Now, take my hand," she instructed him. "You stay behind

me, no matter what, and if anything happens to me, you get to the loading bay. You get into the last shuttle on the left, and you _jump_, " she told him. "Promise me."

"I promise," he said, his blue eyes focused on her own. He clenched his free hand into a ball a few times. "Wait, mom!" he said, just as she'd begun to pivot. "Wait, we need to get Kelly!"

"Which room is she in?" she asked, not hesitating. She didn't have time to argue, and she wouldn't force him to leave someone behind. She didn't leave people behind unless they were dead; how could she expect him to?

"Over here," he said, and he broke free of her. Quickly, he punched in the code to her room and darted inside. A few moments later, he emerged with an equally tall brunette, who had her fingers laced within his own.

"Are we really busting out?" she asked, her voice full of amazement.

"Yes," he swore. "That's my mom. I _told _you she'd find me." He tugged on the girl, guiding them back to Elizabeth's outstretched hand. "And I'm not leaving you, so let's go." He took her hand, then turned back to Kelly. "Stay behind me," he told her seriously. "You're faster than both of us, so if anything happens, you go ahead." He told her which shuttle was set to jump, much to Elizabeth's pride, then nodded to her. "Okay mom. Let's go home."

Elizabeth drew her pistol again, prepared to shoot _anything_ and _everything_ that got in front of her. They ran out of the facility that housed all of the children and cut straight across the main floor of Reach. She wasn't even going to bother with shortcuts; she wanted the most direct route to the hangar, and this was it. Almost instantly, the fury was unleashed upon them. Elizabeth was unwilling to put the children in danger, so she kept them as close to her back as she could, swiveling her upper body as fast as she could to return fire.

As soon as one magazine was done, she'd load another in by slamming the gun down on the clips that held them to her pant leg. She glanced down at her HUD as they all ducked into a small nook in the hall, realizing her shield had started to recharge. She smashed her watch against the wall to activate it, and a golden series of sparks cracked around them.

"Are you guys okay?" she whispered, pressing herself back against the wall as a drone flew by, camera scanning the area frantically for signs of the escapees.

"I'm okay," John said. He looked at Kelly.

"I'm okay, too," she nodded, tightening her grip on his hand. She looked up at Elizabeth for a moment, green eyes wide. "Thank you for coming to get us," she whispered.

Elizabeth felt an ache in her heart. "I will _always_ be there to get you," she promised. "_Always_. Never, ever forget that. Either of you. Now, let's go. It's not far. Stick close to me, and don't

forget, if I get held up, you get on that ship and you get the fuck out of here."

The children nodded, then tensed, ready to run. On Elizabeth's mark, the three of them darted across the hall into another nook " they continued to zig-zag down the long corridor, stopping every so often for Elizabeth to shoot down one of the drones or alternately put down someone who came up behind them. By the time they reached the hangar, Elizabeth was on her last magazine.

"Down here," she hissed. The three of them dropped behind a Warthog that was parked in the corner. She looked at them both very seriously, then put her hands on Kelly's shoulders. "Whatever happens," she prompted Kelly.

"We run for the shuttle, and we jump," she finished.

"Good girl," Elizabeth said. She wrapped her into a tight hug, then turned to John.

"I'll be right behind you guys," she promised. "I love you, Jonathan Andrew Force. I love you more than anything. Anything in the whole world."

"In the whole galaxy?" he asked, his voice wavering.

Elizabeth felt her eyes tear up. "In the whole damn universe," she promised. She swept him into a long hug, then kissed him several times on the cheek. Once she let him go, she wiped her eyes with the black sleeve of her shirt, then checked her magazine. She had eleven down and one up. It was enough. _It had to be enough_.

"Okay," she whispered. "On my mark."

There were alarms going off and flashing lights that bathed the hangar in strobes of red and white. Men were running back and forth armed with rifles and radios, and over the intercom system came the shouting of a female voice demanding that they absolutely under no circumstances hurt the children.

"Now!" Elizabeth hissed. She popped up, running right out into the open and giving the children the diversion they needed to race along the wall to the shuttle. As soon as she got more than ten feet from them, all hell broke loose. She saw the yellow of her shield spark wildly as bullets deflected off of it, and she knew that she didn't have much time. She spun on her heel and ran as hard as she could, amazed at how far ahead Kelly and John were. She could see them dart between vehicles and then stop, waiting for an all-clear before moving to the next one.

At once, guards flooded in from the main doors and rushed her, intending to just swarm her so that she had nowhere else to go. Elizabeth gripped the pistol tightly, and despite her nerves, her hands did not shake. As soon as one got close enough, she hit him with the butt of it, then began running backwards to try and keep up with the kids while still watching her own ass.

Finally, they got in too close and she had no choice but to shoot. She emptied her pistol of ammo too quickly, and threw it at the head of the man next-closest to her. She heard the engines of the shuttle

fire up and knew that she was closed, so she turned on the toe of her foot and ran. Her shield sparked again and she saw a gold aura around her for a split-second, then it faded away. Shit. She had nothing. She looked down at the comm to generate another one and realized that it had been smashed somewhere along the way " she was out of luck.

"RUN!" she screamed, seeing the children stall out as they saw her being swarmed. "GO! NOW!" She felt a bullet go straight through her leg and she went down face-first onto the hard concrete of the hangar floor. She pushed up and scrambled to her feet, still just ahead of the few men who dared to chase her after that, and screamed at the kids to turn back when they both abandoned their climb into the shuttle to run for her.

"GO BACK!" she ordered. "JOHN, GO BACK!" She didn't even recognize her own voice; it came out like the howl of a wild, wounded animal. It was Kelly who rocketed past John and slid on her knees to where Elizabeth was, jumping up like a jack-in-the-box and yanking her by the arm.

"Come on!" Kelly commanded, dragging Elizabeth behind her. "I'm not going to leave you, and neither will he!"

Elizabeth was in total shock that a seven year old had as much strength as this girl exhibited, but she didn't question it at the moment, instead choosing to limp/run through the pain to where her son stood, waving his hands wildly at them to move faster. She had almost reached the shuttle, and Kelly let go of her hand and took a bounding leap into the opened door, jumping into the seat to get the thrusters ready. She saw the bay doors start to close and turned to look over her shoulder.

"Now or never, guys!" she cried. She began flipping switches, and found the one to arm the two missiles it had mounted on it. If she could get it up, she'd shoot right through the doors. That would be a last resort, though " they'd still have to fly through the damage.

John had doubled back and was almost to Elizabeth when it happened. He had grabbed her hand in his own, and then over all of the din in the room, he heard a loud CRACK.

His mother's hand went slack in his own and she lurched forward. Blood exploded out of the right upper side of her chest, and she cried out and hit the ground, sliding a few feet before coming to rest on her stomach. For a moment, she didn't move at all, and then she began attempting to push up off the ground with her left hand. She was pouring blood, though, and John began to panic.

"MOM! MOM!" he screamed. "MOM, GET UP! WE GOTTA GO NOW!" He dropped to his knees next to her, trying to help her up. Elizabeth managed to reach inside of her shirt and ripped her dogtags off, then pressed them very firmly in his hand.

"Run," she commanded, coughing up a glob of blood. "Run, baby. Take Kelly and run far, run fast, and don't stop."

"KELLY!" he screamed, his voice up an octave as he began to cry. He was panicking. There was so much blood. He didn't know what to do. He

pushed Elizabeth over onto her back and ripped off his shirt, pressing it down to her chest as hard as he could. Kelly abandoned the shuttle and ran the few paces back to him, standing there in total shock for a moment before snapping into action.

"Get her legs!" she cried.

"STOP!" came the firm command issued. The two children looked up, covered in blood, fully disobeying the order as they continued to try and lift John's mother up to drag her into the shuttle. They felt themselves grabbed from behind as doctors ripped them away from Elizabeth's body, and began kicking and swinging and biting as hard as they could until eventually they were dropped. They scrambled back to Elizabeth, who by now was scarily still, the floor beneath her mottled with bloody footprints throughout the pool that she was in.

John finally stopped trying to move her, and only knelt next to her, his hands on her face, her silver tags still clenched firmly in his left. "Mom, mom, mom..." he repeated, fingers lightly brushing through her hair. "Get up mom, you promised, get up..."

The command to halt was issued, and the soldiers and doctors alike watched on as Kelly crouched down next to John, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. "Stop, John," she said softly. "She's gone."

"She promised!" he exclaimed. He pushed Kelly off of him and continued trying to rouse Elizabeth. "Mom, you promised! You promised! I won't leave you, so you have to get up! Please, mamma, please!"

Kelly knelt in the blood and watched on helplessly as her only friend cried and kept reminding his lifeless mother of her promise not to leave him behind. She placed her hand gently on Elizabeth's own and closed her eyes, feeling tears start to slide down her cheeks.

"Get her to the lab," Catherine said softly, watching the children with a pained look in her eyes. "Get her prepped for cryo."

15. 14: The Present

He hated. He hated so much that it made his chest hurt. Looking out at Earth, swimming in the sea of stars, he grit his teeth together and hated with all of his might.

And it didn't change anything.

Cortana was gone. She had been his partner for so long — she had been his friend for so long. He made connections with people here and there, Spartans mostly, but it was nothing compared to Cortana. Cortana was his best friend; she could read him in a way even Kelly had long lost the ability to do. And now she was gone, and he hated.

He hated her for sacrificing herself. He hated the Didact for causing her to do it. He hated the Covenant for their stupid war. He hated the UNSC for making him into a machine. And most of all, he hated himself for not being able to keep his promise. His word was his

bond; anyone who knew him knew that much. If he said he would do something, especially a promise, he would ensure that he delivered it - on his dying breath, if need be, so long as it was delivered.

As far back as he could remember, he had been like this.

A voice buzzed inside of his helmet and instructed him to come to the Spartan training facility so he could be unsuited. He felt another ache in his chest as he realized that he would have to walk by the other Spartans; that he would have to see that look in their eyes. Nobody would say anything, because that wasn't how Spartans were raised, but that didn't mean they wouldn't think it.

He hated.

As he walked to his station, Sarah stopped what she was doing and held her hand out, fingertips of her suit brushing his lightly. He didn't pull away, nor did he respond "and that was response enough. Sarah stepped back, her head turning to follow him while her eyes clouded over with pain. She would hurt because he was hurt; it was simply her way.

He knew she'd ambush him sooner or later, and he made a mental note to avoid her until he felt like he could speak without putting a hole through a wall. It would probably be a while.

"Up you go," a man said. Their voices all blended together; everything blended together. It was a sea of white and bright lights and Spartans looking on curiously. Some of them hadn't seen him in four years; some more. He could see that a handful had returned from being missing or otherwise in his absence. He couldn't even imagine what they thought about all of this " they were probably wondering if he'd cracked yet.

Joke's on them, he thought bitterly.

"Ready for it," one of the men called to the other. He felt the clamps snap him in place and hook on to his Mjolnir armor. There was a noise and a rush of cool air, and the artificial light of the room hit his eyes for the first time without his visor in four years. He squinted in spite of himself.

Once he was down, one of the men gestured for him to sit and ran over a handful of questions. They were mostly general health questions that he wasn't in the mood to answer, so he was as terse as physically possible before they wisely said they'd call on him later to finish the list. They cut him loose without another word, and he rose and walked out of the too-bright lights, his direction specifically to the room that he would call his own for a while.

He dropped down on the bed, ignoring the way his knees ached as he did so. He'd fallen from ridiculous heights way too much that last time, and he frowned as he knew that he would have to bring that up when that doctor came back with his little clipboard and blue ink pen. With a heavy sigh, he leaned backwards and swung his long legs up and onto the mattress, allowing himself to relax for a few seconds as he sank into the soft fabric. He wished he wasn't in such a bad mood; it'd been a very long time since he'd been in a real bed. He would have liked to have enjoyed it.

A smile flickered across his face as he could imagine what Cortana would have had to say on the matter; no doubt she would have made fun of him for holding onto his sour disposition. His smile faded as quickly as it had come as he realized that she would never be able to tease him again. She'd never be able to remind him that there were two people he needed to be keeping his head down for, or that he was going to wrong way, or that she knew more than he did. She was just... gone.

There was a knock at the door.

"Chief?" the tentative voice called.

John's eyes snapped open. He didn't instantly recognize the voice. "Come in," he called. He would have rather told them to go away, but he felt like maybe if he played up appearances, people would spread the word around and he'd be left alone longer. He looked over at the door, not willing to get up when it was the first chance he'd had to lay down in a long time, and raised an eyebrow at the person who entered.

It was a female that he vaguely recognized for her work with the other Spartans, but it still didn't explain why she was in his room. He finally sat up. "Did you need something?" he prompted. She seemed to be frozen in the doorway, staring at him with pensive brown eyes that were just wide enough to tell him that she was nervous.

"I... I'm sorry to bother you, but... I think you need to take a look at something," she said, her voice meek. She fumbled with something in her hand, and his eyes immediately went from her face to her fidgeting digits; she held a small thumb drive in them, and she kept switching hands with it and running her fingers along the corners in a straight line.

"What is it?" he asked, sitting up a little more straight. He couldn't help that he was suddenly interested in what she had in her hand, especially because she didn't seem to act like she was allowed to have it. He motioned for her to come out of the doorway and into the room more, which caused the automatic door to hiss shut behind her.

"I, uh..." she trailed off. She took a step back towards the door, glancing around quickly. The thumb drive was now firmly up the right sleeve of her coat.

"It's okay," John offered, holding his hands out, palms up. "You don't need to be afraid of me," he eased, his voice smooth. "Come closer."

She edged nearer as he motioned for her to, though she did stop when there was still a few feet between them. "I found this," she said softly. "I found this in my computer right before you came back," she confessed. "I didn't make it. I mean, I left the drive in because I was about to do a system back up, but..." she paused, then cleared her throat. "Someone else made this. And I think.. I think it's addressed to you," she finished.

John frowned. He hated surprises. "I'm not sure what you mean," he said, not even bothering to hide his confusion by this youthful girl and her attempt to give him a drive that was addressed to him by some

magical force. "How exactly is it addressed to me?"

She bit her lower lip, and then half-turned, gesturing to his computer. "I've already seen it, and for that I apologize," she swore to him, dropping down into the chair when he gave her the go-ahead. He scooted to the edge of the bed and watched over her shoulder, thankful she had come close enough for him to see. She plugged the drive into an open port on the computer and sat back in her chair, watching as the screen went dark.

"Hey, cowboy," a soft voice rang over the speakers. "If you're reading this, it means I'm gone."

"_Cortana_," he blurted.

The girl looked back at him. "And that's how I knew it was for you," she said softly. "But, there's more. Just watch," she assured him.

He wanted to tell this girl to _get out_ and let him watch in peace, but since she'd found it, he let her stay. He turned his attention back to the screen, where Cortana had obviously allowed for a long pause, giving him a chance to react. She _did_ know everything, didn't she?

"I'm so sorry, John," Cortana said, her voice pained. "I don't know how it happened, but I can guess that my rampancy became too much for me to bear. I just hope I didn't hurt you, or anyone else, on my way out." She sighed.

John felt a smile flicker across his face. Even in death, she was trying to protect everyone. When would she learn? _When will _I? he thought to himself.

"While you were asleep, I found something that I wanted you to see. I found something that might... might help you, for when I'm gone. The young lady who brought this to you â€" have her take you to the place where the forgotten cryo-chambers are," she told him. "And John... I know you promised me. And you didn't let me down. Now maybe I can help someone else keep a promise for you. Goodbye, friend. My Spartan."

A smile flickered across her face, and then she disappeared from the monitor, leaving the regular view. John grit his teeth again, forcing the pain that he felt in his chest away and turning to look at the girl again. "What is she talking about? Forgotten cryo-chambers? I've never heard of that."

She shifted uncomfortably, sensing that the man had just swallowed a whole mess of emotions. "It's... hard to explain. Basically, people who got frozen for one reason or another and then they just got... left. It happened a lot about twenty or thirty years ago, when stuff started going wrong. Whole cities were lost, and the people who had been put to sleep wouldn't have had anywhere to go back to. I don't know that I can explain it any better, because it's just way above my paygrade," she confessed.

"Anyways, we have a batch on the ship. We found them in an old destroyed lab a few weeks ago and we were transporting them back to Earth when..." she trailed off.

"Okay," John said, accepting her explanation. He stood up, dwarfing the girl so badly that she slunk towards the door like she had done something wrong. He couldn't help but let out a rueful laugh at her reaction, and the sound startled him. When was the last time he'd laughed, however ill-intended?

She opted to make no comment on his height, instead just sighing and shaking her head. "This way," she instructed. "Oh, and please keep the drive," she added. "Please. I insist. She went through some pretty big hoops to get that to you. If I had someone like that in my life, I'd feel honoured."

"Thank you," he managed, his voice sincere. He grabbed the drive out of the computer and dropped it into the pocket of his shirt. "Let's go," he prompted her. "I want to find out what this promise is she's helping be kept." He hadn't even the foggiest sense, either, but he knew that Cortana understood how serious he took these things, so he was pretty sure this wasn't some last-ditch prank of hers.

For a moment, his curiosity was so strong, he forgot to hate.

16. 15: The Present

John stood on the outside of the tube looking in, his brows raised as the small female (Lisa, she said her name was), assessed the damage to it. They couldn't see inside of it at all – it was completely fogged from the frost. It looked like it was in perfect condition otherwise, except for some damage towards the bottom from when it had over-cooled during an electrical issue at its old lab.

"The name on this is totally illegible," Lisa muttered. John stood back and watched her work, and he found that she reminded him of Cortana in the way that she taunted the piece of equipment, asking it why it tried to challenge her so. Lisa crouched down by the base of it and popped a panel off with the end of a screwdriver. She pointed at something on a workbench by him.

"Hand me that, would you?" she asked. She gestured to the soldering iron, wiggling her fingers impatiently when he didn't move quickly enough. He wasn't sure where the meek, scared girl had gone off to, but he didn't mind the change. Damsels never did him any good; they just got him shot at. He'd had about enough of that for one lifetime.

"Gotcha!" Lisa hissed. The door popped open, the frost still crystallized all over the outside of the glass and obstructing their view. She stood up quickly, backing up next to John to see what was inside the tube – and she had to admit, she was a little tense that it could have been a trap, but she glanced over to the Chief and realized that she felt safer with him there.

She saw that his eyes were utterly transfixed on the contents of the tube, and so she turned her head back to it, watching as the cold fog cleared from it. "Oh my god," she whispered.

John, meanwhile, remained somewhat impassive, and he looked to Lisa for information. He saw only a slender, pale woman with long, dark hair and a splash of freckles across her nose and cheeks. He found

her pretty, which was odd, because he never much thought about others, but it wasn't in a perverted sort of way â€" she just seemed so familiar to him, and he instantly felt at ease by her. "Do you know who this is?" he asked, eyes never leaving her. Anyone who had that effect on him was worth knowing more about.

"No," Lisa said. "I just can't believe how well preserved she is." She looked down at the chart. "She suffered some gunshot wounds right before freezing. Looks like she flat-lined on the table and they fixed her up and tossed her in a tube in a real hurry, though." She frowned. "Man, we'd never do that nowadays," she muttered. She took a step back, clipboard in hand. "Be careful," she warned. "She'll wake up in a second, and it's not going to be pretty. It may even be painful."

"She looks so familiar," John mused softly after finally breaking his gaze from the woman to watch Lisa while she searched around to try and find her name or any other information besides a quick medical chart.

Just then, the woman in the chamber woke up â€" and by woke up, she fell straight out of the chamber with her knees folding, the only thing she could do besides scream, "JOHN!", a word which seemed to have been on the tip of her tongue when she'd been frozen. Directly after, she began to cough and choke madly as her lungs forced themselves to take deeper breaths than they had for over thirty years. John stuck his hands out, lightning fast reflexes allowing him to catch her before she hit the ground and blew both her kneecaps out, but he almost dropped her directly after she screamed his name.

Lisa had gone back into the back for something, and came around the corner. "Stay with her for a second," she told him. "I'm trying to find my little DNA tester." She vanished again, leaving John and the brunette alone.

As soon as she stopped coughing, she pushed off of John forcefully; he was surprised when she actually pushed him. She was stronger than most humans he'd encountered, but she was still not at his level. That was odd. "Hey," he warned softly, trying to take her by the shoulders to steady her. "You need to be still," he instructed.

She wrestled with him for another moment, blue eyes as wide as they'd go while she turned her head left and right, scanning the area. She turned back to him as he steadied her, nodding and closing her eyes tightly before popping them back open. "I'm sorry, I â€" when is this?" she asked, trying to breathe steadily.

John grit his teeth. "Twenty-five fifty-seven," he told her. He watched her face fall, and was thankful he had a grip on her when her knees went weak. "Come on," he said softly. "Up you go." With that, he scooped her up effortlessly, turning and placing her down on one of the extended exam chairs they had. He pushed all of the trays and lights away from it quickly so that she wasn't staring down a bunch of sharp utensils and hot lamps, then leaned in a little to look at her.

"When did you knock out?" he asked.

She was grateful for the support, even if she didn't feel very enthusiastic about it at the moment, and only nodded her head in thanks. "Twenty-five eighteen," she said, her voice weak. "I was -" and she broke off.

"It's okay," he urged, placing a hand on her own briefly. His need to protect was kicking in; whatever this woman had seen, it must have been bad. He couldn't remember any sort of Covenant or Flood issues back that far; he himself had only been, what, seven or so? What had she seen that had terrified her so badly? "What happened?"

She shook her head. "I don't know," she said, her eyes squinting as her voice lilted, the threat of crying in her future. "I was -" and she broke off again. "I was trying to save my son from â€" I don't know. He and his friend. John and Kelly. And I woke up here," she added. Her voice cracked. "I promised him. What _happened_? How do I go _back_?" she asked, looking at him with watery eyes.

Just then, Lisa came around the corner, holding up the small metal device. "Hey guys, I found it. Now we can check our Jane Doe here..." she trailed off, then raised her eyebrows. "What? What happened?" she demanded. They were both staring intently at each other, and Lisa was afraid that they were about to fight. When she drew closer, she saw that the woman was crying and the Chief was â€" he looked like he was about there, himself.

"Chief...?" she prompted.

It couldn't be true. He stared back at the woman who sat before him, watching tears spill over her cheeks as she told him that she had to go back because she had promised him. _Promised him_. And Kelly, too. This was what Cortana had found? How? He was so angry at her for doing this â€" not because she had, but because she was gone and he'd never be able to ask her how. John looked up at Lisa, only very vaguely aware that she was even in the room. He looked back down at the woman whose hand he was now holding, staring at how small her own was in his. "Her name is Elizabeth Force," John said, his voice shaky. He gazed into her blue eyes as they lit up at her name. They were like a reflection of his. "She's my mother," he concluded.

17. 16: Chapter 16

Lisa directed John to carry Elizabeth to the Spartan deck where she could have access to the equipment she needed. She had taken a blood sample and saw that Elizabeth's file had been tagged Sierra Alpha, which had been the designation for the very-much limited Spartan Alpha project that had been the driving force behind the ever-successful II batch that, ironically, her son was a part of. Lisa had never seen a Spartan Alpha â€" nobody really had, in fact; there had been a developmental period between the I and II programs where they adjusted their parameters for creating the perfect super-soldier â€" namely, wound the clock down significantly in their candidates. But with every new program came test subjects to ensure success rates would be worth their funding, and that was Spartan Alpha.

"Set her there, please," Lisa directed, closing the door behind John as he laid Elizabeth down on the exam table. She seemed to have

'checked out' for the time being, which may have been for the better. After the massive man did as she requested, he shifted his impressive form to stand in front of the door Lisa had closed. Nobody would be coming in that room unless he wanted them to, and he didn't feel very social at the moment.

Lisa began quickly firing up the virtual monitors, taking the slide she'd sampled from Elizabeth and popping it into the drive as she simultaneously began pulling up information on the project to update herself. "Do you know what the Spartan Alpha project was?" she asked him, running her finger down the scroll bar and skimming what Elizabeth would have received.

"No," he answered honestly. He paused, and then said, "Well, somewhat," he corrected. "I know that it failed. Why?"

"_Not_ entirely," Lisa said. "My father was one of the people who worked with Doctor Halsey on the II program, but he was only third or fourth chair. He was the frontman for the Alpha project. It occurred very briefly before II; it was basically a test run to see what mixtures they could use to enhance people's genetics and abilities. Mostly, they just killed people. The success rate was below seven percent."

"Meaning..." he pressed.

"Meaning that your mother is the last living Spartan Alpha â€" that _I_ know of, anyways." She paused. "She wasn't part of the official program, though. I wonder why her profile is tagged?"

It seemed like a rhetorical question, but John answered anyways. "Could it be because she wasn't in the official program but still received the same round of injections? If that were the case and she ever needed medical treatment, they _would_ need to know, wouldn't they?"

"That seems to be the most logical answer," Lisa agreed. She began running over Elizabeth's vitals, doing the main checks to ensure that the freeze hadn't damaged anything important. "I wish I knew why my father kept her off the books, though," she muttered.

The Spartan folded his arms and watched her as she worked, noticing the furrow in her brow as she spoke. When she had turned back on him to find a small vial and slide a syringe into it, he took a few steps forward and rested a hand on his mother's own, marveling at how much larger his was than hers. She wasn't short by any means, but she was downright petite compared to the massive Spartan.

"Okay, are you ready?" Lisa asked him, preparing to revive the unconscious woman. "She's going to be fully functional this time around," she warned him. "Be ready to stop her from jumping up and trying to kill us."

John said nothing as Lisa slid the syringe into Elizabeth's exposed vein, and in about thirty seconds, the woman tried to spring off of the table and into action. John had a firm grip on her shoulders, effectively blocking her from making it anywhere. It took her a second to realize she was in an exam room and not on an operating table â€" the outburst from before had been completely forgotten in favour of the shock of the sterile, white environment. After a few

seconds, she began to understand that she was safe, but that didn't do anything for her mood.

"Hi, Elizabeth," Lisa said, her voice gentle. John watched her switch gears so easily, and he wondered again where that frightened, timid personality had gone. He assumed it had been more about not wanting to set off the volatile Spartan rather than her actual nature, and it made him wonder how frequently other people would avoid him for the next few weeks.

"Who are you?" she asked. He could see the vein in her neck at attention and her jaw tighten; she was holding in her anxiety in favour of trying to assess the situation before she reacted. He knew that she would take some convincing, and he sighed, flicking his gaze back to Lisa. He hoped she could do the convincing; he still didn't know what to say to her. A part of him was afraid that she would think he was a freak, like so many others before had said to him.

"My name is Doctor Lisa Stark," she said, swabbing Elizabeth's arm with a little alcohol pad. "You're on the UNSC Infinity in a private exam room on the Spartan deck. Do you remember when we woke you?" she asked, still keeping her voice low and soft.

Elizabeth shut her eyes tightly for a moment, then opened them. She was looking between the blonde that seemed to be a carbon copy of her former best friend, and a man that she didn't recognize who appeared to be about the same age as her, if not just a little older. His eyes were brilliantly bright blue, much like her own, and for a moment, recognition flashed over his face as he stared down at her intently. The man who had been at her awakening.

"No," she said, shaking her head. She shrugged beneath the weight of the man's grip, then wriggled to the left, trying to get out from it. She felt him hesitate, and looked back over at him, her own face still a portrait of shock. "Who _are_ you people?"

Lisa sighed, carefully ignoring the Spartan for a moment. This was a lot to take in, she knew. "Elizabeth," she said softly, "what's the last thing you remember?"

Elizabeth pressed her lips together, trying to think. She saw the doctor nod to the man and felt the pressure on her shoulders ease up. "I..." she trailed off. She only vaguely remembered waking up the first time.

"Think, Force," the doctor urged. "What happened before you woke up?"

"I broke into Reach," she said slowly. She looked at the doctor, waiting for the accusations of treason. When the blonde only nodded for her to continue, Elizabeth shifted uncomfortably. "I was trying to save my son and his friend, a little girl. I got them to the Pelican, and then -"

"You got shot," the man finished.

"Yeah," she said flatly. "I kept telling them to run, but they came back to me." She paused. "I don't know if they got out." She looked at the doctor, clenching her jaw again. "Can you tell me?"

Lisa opened her mouth to say something, but the Spartan cut her off. "Give us a minute," he said. It sounded more like a demand than a request, but Lisa didn't feel inclined to argue. She nodded, then gestured to the door.

"I'll be right outside, Elizabeth," she told her reassuringly.

Elizabeth wanted to protest, but the blonde was gone before she could. She tried to steel her nerves as the man circled around to the front of the table, then dropped down into a chair. He was still tall enough that it didn't matter, and Elizabeth felt herself looking at his eyes, regardless of how much she wanted to avoid them. "I remember you," she said, her voice low. "You were there when I woke up."

John resisted the urge to flinch under her gaze. He wished very hard for Cortana's guidance right then, knowing that he would only be met with silence and feeling a pit in his stomach for the effort. He had faced thousands of Covenant soldiers, come close to tasting death so many times that his mouth held that coppery taste forever, and had gone toe to toe with some of the most ferocious Knights the Didact had to offer. Why was this causing him grief?

Probably because it was very seldom that his personal past came around to bite him in the ass.

"I was there when you went down, too," his finally said, his voice breaking a very tense silence. "You promised."

He watched her as she studied him, her eyes wide as the recognition seeped in. He braced himself for what would come next " she may not react favourably to the fact that her son had become some sort of freak. He had no idea how she would react, but he was keenly aware that most people didn't like the Spartans " and even more of them didn't like him, specifically. Despite all he'd sacrificed for the safety of the people around him, they still regarded him with fear and hatred. He had understood the Arbiter's plight more than the Elite knew. It was perhaps one of the many reasons that they stood on common ground.

"John?" she finally asked, her voice pained. She noticed that at the word, the man before her froze; it was as though he believed if he didn't move he wouldn't be seen " but it wasn't going to deter her any. She sat up, sliding off of the table and coming around to stand next to him. He said nothing, staring straight ahead like he was made of stone. Was this some sort of test?

She reached out hesitantly, putting her hand on his shoulder, and felt the muscles in his arm tense up at her touch. "Oh, sweetheart," she murmured. She didn't know what else to say, and so she fell into silence. She was surprised when he turned and stood in one fluid motion " before she could step away, he had swept her into a tight hug. She was fortunate that she was stronger than most; the Spartan could have easily broken the ribs of a normal human.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't keep that promise," she said, burying her face into his neck. She was aware that her feet weren't even touching the ground, and after another brief moment pulled back and said, "How

did you get so _tall_?"

18. 17: Chapter 17

With the tension finally broken in the room, John called Lisa back in and took a seat. His mother still didn't have any idea what Stark had done to her, and since Lisa seemed to have the inside information, she was going to have to catch the woman up to speed.

"Okay," Lisa said, taking a deep breath. She couldn't help but smile; she'd never been involved in anything quite like what had just transpired. In her wildest dreams she hadn't imagined taking the driver's seat in anything involving the elusive Spartan 117, much less seeing her father's handiwork up front and center. Lisa had only just been born when the Spartan Alpha program had come and gone.

"So, the first thing I need to do is update you on what my father did to you. The injections he administered were part of a bridge project called Spartan Alpha â€" it was what came between the Spartan I program and the Spartan II program. You are the only known Spartan Alpha â€" officially or otherwise â€" to not have totally rejected the treatments."

Elizabeth arched her eyebrow. "Your father?" she parroted. "Time out," she declared, making the "t" gesture with her hands. She wanted to ask what Spartans were, but she had to take this one update at a time.

Lisa nodded once, crossing her arms and leaning against the wall adjacent to the tall (and taller) Spartans. "My father was Justin Stark. He's the man who was inoculated you, and from what I know of his personality, I suspect he's the man who also got you inside Reach."

"Yes, he was," Elizabeth said, unable to hide the surprise in her voice. She paused, and then looked at the blonde doctor. "Do you know that you look like the spitting image of my friend? Her name was also Lisa, actually."

"Oh, I'm aware," Lisa said. "My mother was technically the original Lisa Warren." She didn't seem too bothered by what she was telling the duo, although Elizabeth wore a much different expression on her face, and Lisa felt like she'd need to elaborate a little further. "Lisa had her eggs frozen before she was deployed the first time; subsequently, before she died. Her father signed the rights over to ONI when they provided him with version two."

"That's -" Elizabeth began, but Lisa cut her off.

"Crazy? Oh, absolutely. Look, it's a very convoluted story, but the long and short of it is, my mother was infertile and had limited options. My father had Lisa's eggs on hand, and he got the green light from Halsey under the condition that he use some of the same treatments they'd been working on. Obviously at a much lower dose, but she was pretty interested in finding out how much they could do while a child was still in the womb."

"That meddling _bitch_," Elizabeth spat. Her reaction elicited a

noise from John, who otherwise said nothing, but didn't look terribly happy. Of course, Elizabeth couldn't know that after the incidents at Reach, Halsey had greatly changed her attitude and approach with the children, so all she had to go off of was the order to mortally wound her. Her opinion of the good doctor was understandable.

"Sort of," Lisa said, carefully keeping her voice neutral to avoid confrontation from either of them. "I had already been born by the time everything happened, so even after my father was stripped of his career and arrested for treason, they couldn't really do anything to me. They certainly couldn't take me; my father had far too many friends that could leak classified information to the public. They more or less revoked all of his credentials and crippled his scientific career. He got pretty lucky compared to some," she remarked, looking pointedly at Elizabeth, who was now taking her turn at looking utterly passive as to the conversation at hand.

"Anyways," Lisa sighed. "My name was a fluke. My father fought tooth and nail to name me something else, but once my mother had heard the name, she decided she liked it, and nothing else would do. So, I guess you could say that I'm Lima-3."

"Lima-3?" John echoed. He had been following along fairly well given that he didn't know some of the people in question, but that reference was totally lost on him.

"It's a long story," his mother said, giving him a look that plainly told him he was better off not asking. He grunted and settled back into his chair, choosing to ask for the file later so he could keep himself in the ever-growing loop.

"So, what did they do to you?" Elizabeth asked, directing her attention back to the blonde.

Lisa shrugged a little. "Basic aptitude stuff. I'm certainly not physically capable of anything outside of what I've trained to do on my own. My mind is like a sponge, though, which is good since I work around Spartans." She paused. "They also did some passive alterations to my genetic code. I heal at a much faster rate than a normal person. It doesn't make me super-human by any means â€" if you fatally wound me, I will die," she warned, "but I don't get sick, and overall I'm not as squishy as the other staff â€" which is good, because it means I can be present for training exercises instead of in the observation room." She stopped.

"And?" John prompted, sensing there was more.

"I sort of inherited her weapons aptitude," Lisa concluded. She knew that Elizabeth had been keeping score up until this point and would understand what that meant.

He made a noise.

"Hey, if you want to have a contest, I'm good for it," Lisa offered. She'd made a handful of Marines put their money where their mouths were, but she'd never had the pleasure of making a Spartan look bad before.

"No, he doesn't," Elizabeth said, talking over him before he could

get a fully formed word out. She looked at him for a moment. "Don't take a bet before you know what you're betting against," she warned.

Lisa was unable to stop herself from laughing. John set his jaw. "Very soon, Stark," he promised her, "you will accompany us to the range."

"Oh, I was planning on doing that anyways," she countered smoothly. "Getting back to what I was saying before we got sidetracked, Elizabeth," she prompted, focusing her attention on the brunette, "since you're the last remaining Spartan Alpha, I need to see how much of your enhancements stuck â€" I need to run some physical tests anyways to make sure you don't have any thaw damage, but -"

"Thaw damage?" Elizabeth interrupted. "I thought you said I was clear!"

"Force, you were in deep freeze for thirty-nine years," John said, explaining exactly what Lisa was telling her in a much too gentle fashion. He raised his eyebrows, the gesture causing her to stop protesting. "As someone who's been in for four years, I can tell you that you'll really want to do at least the very basic tests."

"And?" Elizabeth pressed, sensing more to what he was saying.

"And," he repeated, "I'd recommend doing more than the bare minimum if you really want to be sure. Besides, it'll be good for you." He paused. "And I can't deny that I'm more than a little interested to see what you can do now that I'm not six."

Elizabeth fell silent. She couldn't decide if she was bothered more by the fact that her son had become a fully grown man in the blink of an eye, or that he was pushing her to test the enhancements that she'd been given like it might provide some sort of entertainment. She didn't think he was being malicious; on the contrary, she felt like he was sizing her up.

"Elizabeth," Lisa prompted, "if my father's notations are correct, you were one of the programs greatest successes. You have to be at least a little curious."

"It isn't even that," John interjected. "I'm not exactly normal," he admitted. "I know you don't know what the Spartan II project was just yet, and I promise I'll let you read as much as you want on it later, but you need to understand what I'm about to say." He glanced from Elizabeth to Lisa for a moment. "If I didn't know my own limits, there'd be a very real chance that I could, by mistake, grab someone's arm a little too swiftly and break it. We're a lot stronger, you and I. You can have all the control in the world and still be a danger if you don't know your own boundaries."

He fell silent, but he'd made his point. A pressure lifting from the spot in between his shoulders where his stress gathered, but he still remained tensed. He had always known what he'd just told her; he'd known it because every Spartan II had gone through that same issue, but for some reason, to actually say it aloud made him feel as though he'd admitted something to himself that he'd been trying to

skirt around for the longest time: the fact that no matter how much he played normal, he just wasn't, and the more he pretended, the more it ate away at him. It was unfortunate that his own limits had been tested when he was still getting the hang of them " he'd been responsible for the life of two ODSs when a group of five had jumped him at the behest of a commanding officer. He'd never forget it, and he didn't want his mother to experience the same sort of guilt that would follow. It would break his heart, and frankly, it had already been broken once fairly recently, so he wasn't looking to repeat the process.

Apparently, though, he was surrounded by abnormal people. He would have never known about Lisa if she hadn't anted up and told them; he knew it was solely for Elizabeth's benefit and not his own, but he still appreciated it all the same " and he was still pretty sure that he was a better shot than she was, but Elizabeth's confidence in her old friend made him wonder just how good she actually was, competition aside. It would have been nice to have a doctor who wasn't utterly useless in every other area of defense for once.

He could feel his mother looking at him when he admitted that he wasn't normal, and he braced himself for what would come next. The inevitable questions, the look of disappointment. When she managed to smile at him, though, he was unprepared, and didn't even think to hide the surprise on his face when she'd spoken.

"Fine," she agreed. "I'll do whatever tests you need me to do. But I do want to know one thing," she said.

Here it comes, he thought to himself. Aloud, he only said, "Yeah?"

"Can I please take a shower and change? I've been wearing the same thing for thirty-nine years, as you like to keep reminding me."

He felt a wave of laughter raise up in his chest, but all that escaped was a low chuckle. He rose, nodding for her to follow. "Come on, Force," he said with a mock exasperation.

"Meet me in the training room in an hour," Lisa said, pointing at them. "Both of you. Chief, I'll go ahead and tech you out then, too. Looks like they've got your suit up and running. I'll see if I can find one for her, too. Hey, Elizabeth, what colour do you want?"

"One thing at a time," John warned her, walking backwards out of the door and pointing back. "Don't overwhelm her."

"Don't you try to mother me," Lisa heard Elizabeth say from the hall. "That's my job."

Lisa raised her eyebrows, unable to stop her smile from spreading across her face. "One hour, Master Chief, or I'll consider it as you forfeiting our match!" she yelled, cupping a hand to her mouth as the door shut.

19. 18: The Future

Everything around him was in complete chaos. The Infinity was going

down, hard, and he cursed himself for not having considered this sooner. He had been too secure, too complacent. With Lisa's last conversation regarding a way to get Cortana back, even partially, plus his mother and Kelly swarming him, he had begun to feel... human again. And now?

"Arbiter," he said, his voice heavier and more raspy through the suit's filtration. "If anything happens to them..." he left the threat open-ended.

The Elite shifted, his black armor already stained with thick purple ichor, the telltale sign of Covenant death. His green eyes narrowed even further into slits than they already were at the Spartan. Before him stood another, much smaller Spartan in a suit of armor that seemed to swallow the darkness around it; the matte black finish offered no reflection save the shimmer he saw from the Elite blood spilled across the front of it.

"I will guard them with my life, Spartan," he assured the man. "But now is not the time for lengthy goodbyes. My ship is waiting, but Rtas cannot hold forever."

He observed as the shorter Spartan only reached out, clasping the man he knew at the wrist tightly. They said nothing â€" at least, nothing he could hear. If they had switched to an internal channel, he did not know, but beneath the tinted visors he felt that they had come to an understanding of sorts that he was not allowed to bear witness to. He felt as though he had just seen a private moment, and shifted to the blonde female who was crouched on the ground, retying a piece of her torn white coat to her leg. She had an impressive burn from the graze of a plasma weapon; the fabric of her slacks had melted into the wound, and the smell made his snout twitch.

"With your life, and everything that comes after it," the Spartan said. He gave one last look to the trio, then turned. "Kelly and I will meet you at the render-vouz point. If neither of us are there within a week, take them to the next location." From down the hall, Kelly could be heard screaming to John that he either needed to move it or lose it.

"You have my word," the Arbiter swore. "Come now, child. We must make haste." He held a clawed hand out to the injured human, and she took it, allowing him to heft her up. She cried out in pain, only for the other Spartan to reach out and grab her, cradling her over a shoulder.

"Ready when you are, Arbiter," the filtered voice said.

It gave Arbiter a split second of pause. _A female?_ He knew there were female Spartans, but so many of them had been lost to the battle of Reach, and the rest the Master Chief certainly knew could take care of themselves. Why was this one so important? He cursed his own hesitation and nodded towards where the ship was. "Follow me, and stay close," he commanded. "They are not aware I have come and will be reluctant to attack me. We will use it to our advantage for as long as we are able," he added.

The matte-black clad Spartan drew a silver pistol from the bulky thigh rig anyways, checking the magazine quickly before nodding and falling into step behind him. The Arbiter glanced back at her and

continued on. "I thought that was an older model?" he asked. "I am far more familiar with the weapons of your kind than I would like," he offered.

"It is," came the slightly distorted voice. "They said it was too overpowered for normal use."

"And this does not constitute as normal use?" he inquired, picking his way over a few dead Unggoy that littered the corridor.

"Nothing about me is normal, honey," the female assured him.

The Arbiter had never been called honey before, and despite his inexperience with the nickname, he immediately decided that he did not care for it.

20. 19: The Present

Elizabeth felt so much better after she had showered and changed. Lisa had found clothing for her, and she finally emerged from the bathroom after nearly an hour, wet hair loosely braided and left to drape over her right shoulder. She made her way into the living room area of the quarters she'd been temporarily assigned, pausing only to enjoy the feel of the carpet under her feet. Her senses felt stupidly acute; she could hear even the softest of sounds, see even the slightest of things and feel even the lightest of touches. It was tolerable for the moment, here in her quiet room, but she wondered how well she could cope with it if she were in the middle of a skirmish. She dropped down on the couch and picked up the little laptop that had been provided for her. Lisa meant for her to get caught up as quickly as possible, and Elizabeth felt the best way to start was with John.

The information passed quickly, though much of it had been blacked out, and she found that every time she opened a new document she had to find several to accompany it just to familiarize herself with the state of affairs surrounding the missions he was on. She had clearances once upon a time, but she doubted seriously that they were valid any longer. She'd have to see about getting her records expunged, although she had a feeling that she'd be in a lot of pockets before that came about. Lisa made her seem like some sort of anomaly, and someone somewhere in a uniform would no doubt have a use for her before they'd do her any favours. She did find that some of the advancements that the UNSC had made since her subsequent vanishing had really surprised her, though, while others she'd been around for in their very beginning stages. By the time Elizabeth had started reading about the Flood, she realized she was feeling sick to her stomach. The Covenant; the Flood. What other horrors had they uncovered while she'd been tucked away?

"How do you feel?" John asked.

Just as Elizabeth had been wondering how she could hope to survive in this new, terrifying world, she had somehow missed her own son's massive frame standing just out of the edge of her vision. He was propped in the door frame that married the den and the small kitchen together, arms crossed over his chest. He had a way of standing so still that he seemed to simply disappear, if that were even possible, and she'd looked over his presence entirely. She didn't miss,

however, the small quirk of his lips as he realized he'd caught her off guard.

"Sorry," he offered. He sounded sincere.

She swallowed, then gestured for the couch, inviting him to sit. "It's fine. I'm still getting used to everything. It's a little overwhelming," she admitted. "Lisa said I had a lot to catch up on. She wasn't lying."

He pushed off of the frame and walked slowly to where she sat, positioning himself on the other side. "You'll feel better once she techs you out properly. I guess there was no time before, what with the whole infiltrating a military compound and all," he said, looking over at her pointedly.

Elizabeth looked away, staring ahead at the wall. "It didn't go exactly like I'd planned, I'll admit," she said dryly.

"Well, you made a strong enough impression that they didn't just toss you out an airlock. That counts for something," he remarked, reaching over to catch her attention. "Hey," he said softly, prompting her to look back at him. "I know you feel like you failed, me, mom. You didn't."

She looked down at his hand on hers, then up at him. "I didn't?" she asked. It felt like such a stupid question, but even in her drug-addled sleep state she'd been left wondering it over and over again, replaying the scene thousands of times and trying unsuccessfully to correct where she'd gone wrong. Cryostasis dreaming, unfortunately, was maddening and torturous â€" what John himself had experienced for four years she had experienced for ten times that. She was lucky her mind came out in tact at all, though she knew that the weeks to come would be the real test. She seemed fine now, sure, without any real pressure on her. What would happen when she needed to remain calm?

"No," he said firmly. "If anything, you helped me to be the best person I could be. I know it sounds clichÃ©, but you were all I ever had to go on in that regard. Especially after I saw what you did; what you were capable of. You showed me what it meant to fight, mom. Really fight. Who I am now, what I've accomplished â€" a lot of it is because of you. You and Cortana."

"Cortana?" she asked. "The AI I read about? She seems... like-minded. I'd like to meet her, if that's possible?" She didn't like that the woman was based around Halsey's personality, if only because she did very much think that the woman had stolen her child from her, but the more she'd read, the more it had seemed as though the AI had sort of formed a personality of her own. She'd seen a few transcripts and could understand why the duo had been paired up to begin with. It also was interesting to see how many of her own traits John had picked up along the way â€" and a little overwhelming.

It was his turn to look away, and she saw him visibly withdraw himself by the way the muscles in his jaw flexed as he clenched and unclenched it. He definitely took after her, that was for sure. "Not anymore," he said quietly. "She's gone." It was the first time he'd really said it aloud, like that anyways, and the revelation made his stomach swim. He had been spending a lot of time doing other

things to stay busy so that this exact moment wouldn't happen: the moment where he had to admit that she was gone, _dead_, and she wasn't coming back.

"Oh," she said. "I'm sorry." She reached out and placed her hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged her off. Quickly she withdrew, unwilling to damage the precarious nature of their relationship thus far.

"Yeah, everyone's sorry," he echoed, his voice very tight. He was restraining himself from yelling; he did feel bad that he'd pushed her. "Doesn't really bring her back, does it?"

"Believe it or not, John, that's something I know a thing or two about," she said softly. "When we thought you died, everyone said it was over. I knew that it wasn't, though. In my bones, I knew. And now here I am," she said, gesturing to the room. "I may be a little worse through wear, and I may have been trapped in my own personal hell for a very long time, but I _am_ here, and I'm not planning to leave again."

He looked at her again, studying her face. She spoke so gently, but he knew better than to be fooled by her tone. Elizabeth was a force of nature, however calm she seemed. He hadn't really given any thought to the possibility that there would be a way to retrieve Cortana. Her data had been totally lost; she'd said she'd burned herself at both ends deliberately to help stop the Didact and allow him to escape. Why would he not have trusted that? It never occurred to him until he looked into Elizabeth's eyes that there may have been a chance that she was still alive, or that she could have been lying to him for the sake of sparing him the descent into madness that she was hurtling towards.

"No," he said firmly. He couldn't believe that she might be alive because the chance of her _not_ being alive would just make it worse. He'd cope with it now and move on. "I refuse to drag it out anymore then it already has been. There's no reason to. She's not coming back." He felt that tightness in his chest, that hatred, and it made him keenly aware that his mother was incredibly perceptive. She was looking at him like she didn't believe him, despite the fact that she said nothing. He was a little surprised when she let it go with a simple nod, but he had a feeling it wasn't the last time he'd heard about it.

"Lisa's expecting us," he said, changing gears before she had a chance to think any further on the matter. "Are you ready?"

Elizabeth stood up, holding a hand out to him. He clasped hers by the wrist, not missing when her knees buckled slightly as he hoisted himself up. Due to the exoskeleton that the Spartan II recruits all had grafted onto their own bones, they had a _mass_ to them that people didn't often expect. It was part of the reason he'd been so insistent that she get her bearings " she may not hurt _him_, but even without a new and improved frame, she'd still hurt a normal human.

"I don't know what to be ready _for_," she admitted, walking to the door of her room with her son on her heels.

"Lisa's pretty low-key," he assured her. "I doubt that she'll do much more than boring diagnostics. I don't think she was even serious about shooting with me," he added. None of the other Spartans had much to say about Stark when he'd asked, only that she was protective of her work "like so many of the other doctors and scientists on their team. Nobody had mentioned her track record with firearms, either, which only made John think that she was full of it even more. He shook his head a little, then followed her out of the room, turning the light off behind him. "It'll be fine," he promised.

21. 20: Chapter 20

"You are so full of shit!" Elizabeth shouted at the observation window, finger pointing up at John as he leaned over the admin panel and watched her testing. "This isn't fine at all!"

He opened his mouth to respond, but Lisa leaned across him and pressed a button, then spoke. "Sorry, Force. I told you I had to find out the extent of your abilities. Did you think I was joking?" she asked, her eyebrows raised. "Now come on, I need you to run the exercise again from the beginning. As soon as that's done I'm putting you in the suit."

Elizabeth turned her back to them down on the deck below, running her hands through her sweat-matted hair. She was getting her ass kicked "not because she lacked skill, because she was surviving just fine" it was just that she was so out of practice that her body didn't want to work with her as quickly as she wanted it to. Had it been this hard before? She'd started picking up the pace towards the end, but not before going almost completely deaf as a concussive blast from her left had thrown her into the thick steel wall. She had no idea how much reinforcement the room had in it to survive this kind of a beating, but it was marginally less than she had in her own body.

"Five more minutes, I promise," Lisa said. She backed away from the mic as the lights dimmed in the room, her eyes flicking back and forth between Elizabeth's monitors and Elizabeth herself. She crossed her arms, a frustrated sigh coming from her. It was loud enough to bring the Chief's attention from the skirmish below to her, and he moved over to the monitors.

"What?" he asked, arching an eyebrow at her. He watched her face as she studied the charts, her brown eyes narrowing as she leaned in a little, as though she were looking for something specific. He noticed that she made a very particular face when she saw something that she didn't like in her work.

"She's not peaking," she said, pointing at something specific on the screen. "She's supposed to have way more neuro-response than this." She looked back down at the training deck, eyes reflecting the flames that exploded below. They may have been holographic, but they were still intense when the room automatically began adjusting the oxygen levels to compensate for them.

"This isn't intense enough," she said suddenly, raising her arms as though she'd just had an epiphany. "We need to go to ground. It'll be easier once we're out in the woods and not in a huge metal room; her

body will respond the way it's supposed to. Why didn't I think of that before?"

Below, there were a series of gunshots and it directed his attention elsewhere; he watched as she took hold of a shotgun and began shooting at the grenade-carrying Grunts rushing rapidly from the flames at her. "I think this is intense enough for the moment." When Lisa looked at him, he exhaled through his nose. "I know how I sound," he snapped.

"Your makeup is totally different from her own," Lisa protested. "She's only ever known high pressure situations. I can't possibly replicate the circumstances for her initial experience to Spartan Alpha, and I don't want to. Nobody should ever have to go through that," she added, trying to calm the Chief down. "But I do need her performing how she's supposed to be, or I can't make sure that she's not going to drop dead at a later date."

The Chief's face froze, all the anger forgotten as he felt a beat of panic, his blood rushing cold. "What do you mean drop dead?" he demanded. He took a step forward, advancing his massive frame on Lisa quickly enough that she took a visible step back.

"The Alphas. I sent you the data, did you not look it over?" she demanded. "No? Okay, well, if you had, you'd have seen what I was talking about. Something was inherently wrong with their mixes. Some of them were reported to have just died. That's it. Fell to the ground, heart stopped, brain stopped. Everything stopped. My father's notes all say that in testing they showed common abnormalities, but I can't get to the point where they'd appear because she's not under enough duress."

He didn't respond, but he did back off. "So, what? Her abilities are only activated by stress?"

"No," Lisa said. "But the abnormality only shows when the patient is under extreme conditions â€" fear, urgency. Maybe we don't have to go to ground, but we do need to replicate that somehow. If we can't, then I can't clear her medically, and I'm afraid that our time with her beyond that may be incredibly limited."

She watched as the Chief's eyes darkened, and he folded his arms across his chest. "What if it does show? What then?" he asked. He felt he was doing a very good job of not reacting to the situation too much; inside, he was ready to panic. Really panic. He could hear what they'd say about him now. Probably be a lot of people he'd pissed off at that trial, no doubt.

"If it shows, then I can fix it. He came up with a formula after it happened to correct the abnormality. It was too late for them, but it won't be for her." She paused. "Did you think I was just pushing her for the sake of 'science'? She knew my mother â€" my actual mother. I've got a lot of questions for her before I burn that bridge," she chastised.

"You're one-hundred percent sure that this is what you need to bring on the glitch?" he asked again.

"Yes," she said firmly. She glanced down as the lights came back on and the room emptied out. Elizabeth was standing in the center of the

room, shotgun in hand. As soon as she dropped it, it vanished, and she stepped away from it quickly. "And then I can stop running her through the ringer and put her in a suit," she added, motioning for the woman to come up into the observation room. "Of course, that'll be a whole new round of training, but not like this."

He nodded. "You'll need to dig a lot deeper than what we have here. She was committed to a mental hospital. See if you can't program that sort of scenario. That should give you the reaction you need. Don't spawn any weapons for her, either. In fact, if you really want to be thorough, knock her out first. When she comes to, have her try to get out of the hospital from a locked room. Up the settings â€" put it on the most difficult, the one where you aren't _technically_ supposed to beat it."

"Spartans beat those scenarios all the time," Lisa protested, though she was otherwise shocked at his sudden suggestion.

"Yeah, but we've been trained from childhood. She hasn't. You recreate the night of her breakout, though, and she'll be very convinced she's trying to get out. To get to _me_." His tone was coarse, and he swallowed, disliking how rough his voice had become. He didn't want to think about what he was about to put his mother through â€" putting her back in that place was one thing. He could remember as a child that she did not like to be confined or cooped up otherwise; it wasn't a phobia, but if she had been drugged and held somewhere against her will? He could only imagine what this would do to her.

Elizabeth came through the door, wiping sweat from her brow. "That was ridiculous," she breathed. "I hope you got what you wanted. What _were_ those little freaks that kept throwing explosives at me?" she demanded. "Every time I aimed at one he would scream and run the other way."

"Grunts," John answered, giving Lisa a lingering look that Elizabeth missed through her fatigue. He kicked a rolling chair to her and she extended her booted foot out to stop it, then dropped down in it with an appreciative nod. "Only one faction of the Covenant."

"Oh," she said, a look of realization in her eyes. "They look so different on the computer." She shook her head, then lurched forward, folding over at the waist and placing her elbows on her knees to prop herself up. "Did you get what you needed?" she prompted again.

Lisa had an expression on her face that Elizabeth didn't like. "What? Oh, did you two have a fight?" she asked sarcastically. "Sweetheart, I'm sure you're just as good of a shot as she is," she began. She jerked to the right as she felt a stinging in her left arm. "Ow!" she cried. She focused on her son, who stood over her with a syringe. "Damnit, John! You need to warn me before you -"

She fell out of the chair and landed on the floor in a heap.

"You program it in while I carry her down there," he said over his shoulder to the doctor. He paused, turning to regard her more fully. "You owe me for this, Lisa," he told her sharply. "This is going to wreck her."

She nodded. "I know," she said softly. "If there was any other way -"

she paused. "I owe you one, Chief," she concluded. After he left the room, she sighed. "Guess we're not going to have that shooting contest," she said to the empty room.

22. 21: Chapter 21

When Elizabeth awoke, she was in her room in the ward. She groaned, raising her hand to the side of her head where she had a massive bump. She'd cracked it when she fell out of the chair, but unfortunately she didn't remember that. In fact, she didn't remember much of anything at the moment. She sat up, looking around, her blue eyes bleary from the drugs. She pushed off of the sparse bed, the mattress stained with elements that she was certain weren't her own; the texture of the thin sheet told her that the stains were old. The whole room smelled old, actually — like moth balls and urine.

She moved to stand, a heavy clanking sound catching her attention in the otherwise silent room. Her hands were shackled. On closer inspection, so were her feet. She uttered a cry of anger and rushed to the door, pounding on the thick metal until she heard footsteps.

"Force, calm down!" the guard issued. "Or I'll come in there and calm you down myself!"

"This is a mistake! I'm not crazy!" she shouted back. The last thing she could really recall was a doctor giving her some sort of drug to make her mind slow down, but she knew they were trying to make her forget him. She'd never forget her son, so the joke was fully on them.

From up in the observation room, Lisa stood with her arms tightly crossed, her eyes watching with intense interest. She felt John's elbow brush her every so often as the two of them shifted in place, closer to each other than either would normally find comfortable. The moment was rather tense, however, and Lisa felt better with the Master Chief as close as possible.

"What program did you run?" he asked, his voice hushed as he watched the interaction below. It made his chest ache with a feeling he was getting damn tired of: pain. He closed his eyes briefly, unable to stop seeing her scrabbling around the room and trying to find a way out.

"I told Uriel to modify the parameters for the mental hospital load-out we already have," she answered. "I fed him her files so that he could make it more realistic."

"He's sadistic," the Chief snapped.

"He is," she agreed. Of all of the AI she had encountered, the Archangels were some of the most independent. She and Uriel had been assigned to work together more than a few times, but that didn't stop her from disliking him and the way he interpreted her requests. "He generally sticks on the Spartan deck, but I needed him to do this," she said. "Joy," she added flatly.

"What the hell is happening?" he shouted, interrupting her. Lisa's head snapped from him back to the scene, where she watched as

Elizabeth was backing away from the door to her room. The guard came in after her, shutting it behind him. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but she could tell by the body language that the situation was no good.

On the ground, Lisa had aggravated the guard to the point where he came into her room after her. "I need to find my son!" she shouted, finally taking short steps backward so she didn't trip over herself after he'd barged in.

"Your son is dead, lady. How many times we gotta tell you this?" he demanded. He patted an asp at the side of his belt, then pointed a finger at her. "You gonna behave, or am I gonna have to teach you about respect again?"

Elizabeth watched him carefully, as though she was sizing him up. "My son isn't dead," she snapped. "And the sooner I get out of here, the sooner I can find him." She took a step forward, hesitating when he grabbed the asp again.

"Force, you need to go stand in your spot, or I'm going to have to use this," he warned.

She moved into her spot almost instantly, and up in the observation room, Lisa grabbed the Chief's arm, fearful for what was going to happen next. She wanted to stop the program, but she needed the data. She watched as the man turned to leave the room, only to have Elizabeth go right behind him and wrap her chains around his neck. She dragged him back into the room with her newfound strength, strangling him and dropping his corpse at her feet.

"Oh my god," Lisa muttered. She watched as Elizabeth used the keys to undo her shackles, then pulled his asp from the clip on his belt and slipped out into the hallway. Inevitably the alarm went off, and the "facility" had gone into full-scale panic. The perimeter had been locked down and guards came after her en masse, but she was running on the notion that she was escaping to go after her son.

She heard a loud beeping on the monitor just as Elizabeth managed to wrestle a gun from one of the armed security guards that patrolled the outside of the building. She was using him to block gunfire as she made her way through the front gate, and she was obviously in a hurry.

"What was that?" he demanded, distracting her from watching as the woman took out person after person. It was a rage like she'd never seen before, and it was making her sick to her stomach even from her vantage point safely above the chaos.

She turned and looked at the monitor. "We got what we needed," she said. "She's good. No abnormalities." She turned back to him. "She's fine. Aside from the obvious predilection to using people as a human shield," she added weakly.

"Uriel, shut the program down," he commanded. He turned his head to Lisa, his eyes narrowing at her words. "You put her in a bad position and wiped out her memories with a knock-out drug. What did you think she was going to do, invite them for tea?" he snapped.

As the lights came back on, Elizabeth's human shield vanished and she

threw her arms back, a startled cry echoing in the large room. She dropped the gun she'd stolen, only to have it vanish before it hit the ground. She whirled around in place before dropping to her knees, hands over her head.

"She's got no idea what's going on or where she is right now," Lisa said. "You need to get down there. Give her this," she added, grabbing a syringe and pressing it into his hand.

"Why do I need to?" he asked, though he began moving towards the exit. "She'll recognize you before she'll recognize me," he added. "Remember?"

"Don't count on that, blue eyes," Lisa said, her tone teasing despite her mood.

As he went down the stairs quickly to where Elizabeth was, he told himself that anymore testing Lisa wanted to do would have to be seriously discussed beforehand. From the way she'd grabbed his arm, she wasn't used to violence of that caliber, and if she wanted to stick close with them, it would only get worse. His mother was going to be suited up and trained, and more than likely deployed. If Lisa championed herself as Elizabeth's personal doctor, she would need to learn how to handle worse — especially if her temper was anything like her son's.

"Mom?" he called softly. It still felt strange to say it; downright awkward, in fact. Never in a million years had he thought he'd utter the word again after she'd dropped like a sack of bricks a few feet from him, but now, especially not after everything else he'd been through, did he feel like it was in his vocabulary. And yet, here they were.

She looked up from her spot on the floor, hands still over her head, fingers splayed through her hair. Tears were streaming down her face as her blue eyes reflected total vacancy and shock. She had no idea what was happening, so when the massive man knelt down and reached out for her arm, it was understandable that she did not feel inclined to give it to him.

"Hey, hey," he said softly. "Look at me, it's okay." He held his hand out to her, and gradually managed to get a response that wasn't a flinch when she reluctantly made eye contact. Recognition flashed over her face, and before she could say or do anything else, he'd yanked her hand out and stuck her in the arm with the needle.

"Watch out," came Lisa's voice over the mic. "One of the side effects of that is —"

Just then, Elizabeth turned quickly and began to vomit.

"Nausea," she finished, her tone lacking emotion.

"Thanks for the warning," he said, looking up at her through the window. He made a mental note to embarrass her more thoroughly than he already intended to as soon as they went to the range. Vomit was just another thing to add to the list of reasons he wasn't entirely too fond of Lisa. Her only saving grace was that she genuinely seemed to care about his mother, even though he felt like some of that was a vested interest in her status as a Spartan Alpha.

He was unaware that the vomiting had stopped when a sharp sting bit him across the face. He snapped back to reality to see Elizabeth's short (to him) frame standing over him, her body angled from the slap she'd just donated to his cause. "Don't you ever pull some shit like that on me again, Jonathan Force," she snarled. She looked up at the window. "You either, or I'll make sure you never get another piece of data off of me again." She practically spat the words out, then cleared off of the floor and slammed open the exit door at the ground level, setting off an alarm as it banged against the other wall.

23. 22: Chapter 22

The Chief had left Lisa to deal with Elizabeth, which he told her she deserved. She hadn't protested, because she felt pretty bad about what she'd done. Uriel had offered his wisdom in the form of cold commentary after the Chief had left her standing in the observation room alone, and Lisa got the feeling that after the loss of his own AI, the man wasn't too keen on listening to any other version for a while. She gathered the small drive that housed the information on it about the Spartan Alpha project and dropped it into the pocket of her slacks, then hung her jacket up in her locker in the Spartan deck and decided that she needed to find a suit for Elizabeth before it was too late. She'd talk to her after.

She began taking a quick inventory of what models they had. It would be harder to find one given that Elizabeth was short â€" 5'10 wasn't precisely small, but she was a foot shorter than John, even if she made Lisa look short by comparison. Lisa had never envied the height of the Spartans, and was comfortable at her own 5'6, but she was beginning to feel like the runt of the litter after having spent all day in close quarters with mother and son.

She frowned, coming across a Mark IV suit that had been decommissioned when its intended had passed away during testing. Elizabeth's skeletal structure still stood in her own way, and that would be something that Lisa would need to figure out a way around. She'd either have to take the IV and modify it, or she'd have to look into her father's notes and see if he'd found a way to get around the surgeries. She knew that there were mentions of it in the Spartan Alpha project, because they had been trying to find a way to not cut people open, but they had obviously opted for it, so what would have made that decision for them?

Those were the last thing on her list of items to avoid talking about at the moment. She sincerely doubted that Elizabeth would agree to them â€" and she knew the Chief wouldn't. He'd only agreed to put Elizabeth through that mental anguish because it was a literal life or death situation. Lisa would need to find a reason to convince him that the Mjolnir was every bit as severe, or he'd never go for it. She never imagined that she'd be dealing with the man directly, and she wondered idly if he had a habit of roadblocking the other doctors. She assumed this was a case he had an interest in, but Lisa had already promised several times that she wasn't going to put Elizabeth through any unnecessary danger.

She sighed, saving the information on the suit and adding it to the drive she kept. She'd show it to Elizabeth and they'd go over the

Spartan Alpha information together; if they couldn't find anything satisfactory, she'd try to modify the suit first. She was pretty sure she could; she knew at least two of the engineers who had a hand in the latest suit's issue and she could probably convince them. They loved lab rats, which is what Elizabeth effectively was at that point.

"Is it true?"

The voice startled Lisa, causing her to instinctively shut down everything she was looking at with a quick keystroke. She turned around to see an incredibly tall female standing behind her chair, green eyes wide with anticipation. Kelly pressed her lips together, waiting for an answer, her brows lofting as if to prompt Lisa into action.

"Is what true?" Lisa asked dumbly. She had no idea what rumours were flying around the Spartan deck now. It could have been anything " from Chief's emotional state to Lisa's sudden interest in him to bad information about the Flood trying to make a comeback. They were like teenagers when they had nothing to shoot at.

"Is she alive?" Kelly demanded. Her voice was wavering, hopeful. She gripped the back of Lisa's chair, causing the woman to stand up and put the object effectively between them. "Someone said they saw her," she accused.

"Who?" Lisa asked, instantly moving her thoughts to Cortana. "I don't think -"

Kelly frowned. "Is his mom alive?" she hissed, trying to keep her voice down as a group of people walked by. "It's just buzz right now; someone told me they saw a pretty dark-haired female with the Chief and the blonde doctor, which I know is you, and they said her eyes were really really blue. I remember what she looks like, you know," she added.

Lisa was stunned. She'd forgotten that Elizabeth's prison break with the Chief had also included a second party " the little girl that was Kelly had been taken along by the young Chief's need to protect his friend. She opted not to say anything about how Elizabeth seemed to be surprisingly good at handing out traumatizing childhood moments, only weighing how mad the Chief would be if anyone really had confirmation that Elizabeth was who she was. She tried to take into consideration that Kelly already knew her, and given how mad Elizabeth was at the moment, a familiar face that she didn't think was screwing with her might do her some good.

"Yes," Lisa said. "I'm about to go see her now. I have to bring her some information that she won't like," she admitted. "She's already a little cross with us today." She didn't offer to explain why, knowing that Kelly wouldn't ask.

"Can I see her?" Kelly asked. "Please?"

Lisa hesitated. She was greatly considering how the Chief was going to react, if only because she was the one who would have to deal with it at the moment, but she fell back on her earlier conclusion that Elizabeth wasn't able to experience familiarity much these days, so Kelly could possibly help create even the slightest amount of

stability. "Okay," Lisa agreed. She held up her hand, implementing a caveat. "You can't say anything to anyone about this yet," she warned. "The Chief obviously hasn't for a reason."

"He won't. He's too busy avoiding all of us," she said sharply. She offered no apology for her statement, feeling they were true if not a little embittered. When your best friend vanishes for four years, then suddenly comes back into existence with a terrifying account of his experience on Requiem, then says that the one 'relationship' he ever had is over because the individual died, well... he hadn't given Kelly a lot of time to react before he'd simply excused himself and apologized that he didn't feel like talking. She'd left him alone because he wanted to be alone, but she knew that eventually alone was going to become a habit " more than it already was. Now that she knew that it was true, that the woman they'd seen around actually was the woman she'd met briefly in her youth, Kelly felt like there was even a shred of hope that she could try to reconnect her friend with the world again.

"He's got a lot to deal with," Lisa said, her voice carefully neutral. She didn't wait for Kelly to comment, because otherwise she'd have had to have explained why she was defending his self-destructive behaviour, but she knew that Kelly wouldn't soon forget the remark and she'd definitely have a watchful eye on what the trio was up to now, if not find a way to insert herself into the situation completely to satisfy her own curiosity. She couldn't blame her, and she didn't think it would hurt anything, honestly. "Come on, I'm going over there, now. I have to warn you, though, she's not a fan of me right now. I know I said that she was cross with us, but I don't think that really covers it," she explained.

"Well, what did you do?" Kelly asked, following Lisa out the door. She fell into step alongside her, glancing up every so often to nod to someone in passing.

"Ehhhh," Lisa said, reluctant to explain. "I had to run some tests on her, and they were pretty brutal. She, ah, smacked the Chief when he went down to administer some of that neuro-stimulant solution we use in conjunction with that neuro-knockout. After she almost threw up on him," she added flatly.

Kelly suppressed a laugh by snorting into her hand, then straightened her posture. "She smacked him? Open handed?"

"Yeah," Lisa confirmed, though she didn't find it as funny as Kelly had. Elizabeth had been white-hot pissed, and for a second, she thought the Chief was going to lose his cool on her. To his credit, he had just come back upstairs and spoken very calmly and very firmly, but Lisa felt that it was almost worse than getting yelled at. That man had a scary calm that unnerved her. "Right across the cheek."

"What did he do?" she asked, aware that she was finding this much more funny than the doctor.

"He let it go. I doubt he's forgotten about it, but I think he knows it was just a reaction. I doubt we'll see much more outbursts like that from her. We were pretty cruel on the last test," she said. "I let Uriel modify the load-out to make it more personal," she admitted. "I was kind of asking for it."

Kelly nodded. "He's a sadistic little bastard, isn't he?" she asked. She'd been paired up with him once, but they'd had to remove him. She said she'd rather be blind than have him in her ear twenty-four hours a day. He was crazy. Not in the way Cortana was; Uriel was too good at calculating risk and he put her way too close to danger for her own comfort. Kelly wasn't a sissy by any means, but she liked to make her own decisions about when she was going to do something stupid; she didn't need any help from an AI. "The others aren't so bad," she said offhand. "Uriel is the worst."

"I know," Lisa agreed. She came to a stop by Elizabeth's door. "Don't mention it, but I think I'm going to see if they can pair up Gabriel with Elizabeth for a while. Just until she can get used to the suit. He's pretty... easy-going," she finished.

"You're going to try and fit her for a suit?" Kelly asked, stunned. "Isn't that impossible unless she's -"

Lisa cut her off with a wave. "Trust me, I'm working on it," she replied, her voice tired. She turned and knocked on the door. "Elizabeth," she called. "It's Lisa. I brought someone who wants to see you."

There was no response, and then a moment later, the door opened and Elizabeth stood, arms folded tightly and expression dark. "Lisa, I don't think now is a good time," she said. She stopped when she saw Kelly, her arms dropping to her sides as though they'd gone numb. She may have been a great deal taller and more developed, but that didn't mean that Elizabeth didn't recognize those green eyes of hers.

"Wow, it is true," Kelly breathed. "Hey, Mrs. Force," she said, unsure of what else to call her. She made a small noise of surprise when Elizabeth grabbed her in a hug, and for a moment wasn't sure what to do. Lisa made a face at her and Kelly blinked, then returned the hug. She hadn't been expecting that reaction. People were happy to see her often, but it was mostly because she was coming to save their sorry asses. Nobody'd ever hugged her for the sake of missing her â€" not like that.

"Come on, let's take this reunion inside," Lisa directed, putting a hand on Kelly's back and pushing at her to go through the door. The Spartan let go of Elizabeth and followed her in, babbling like an excited child about how much she'd missed. It never occurred to Kelly to ask how Elizabeth was alive, mostly because she didn't care. Kelly often found that people focused too much on the details that didn't matter and let an entire situation pass them by â€" she wasn't the type of person to dwell on things that didn't need to be dwelled on, at least, not for the moment.

John watched from the end of the hall as Lisa and Kelly went inside Elizabeth's quarters and nodded a little to himself. He knew his mother would have been happy to see Kelly; Lisa had made a good choice, there. Still, he was going to have to find a way to address the situation on an official level soon. Elizabeth couldn't be kept forever as Lisa's top secret pet project. She'd have to be brought out into the light eventually. He'd give it a few more days, until he was sure. Then he knew that she'd be bombarded by questions and appointments and training, things he wouldn't have any say or control over, no matter how much he wanted to. He wasn't ready to let go just

yet.

But then again, he'd never been good at letting go of things.

24. 23: The Future

Elizabeth leaned against the wreckage of the ship and took a moment to check the shotgun she'd grabbed. It was full of shells, but it wouldn't be very practical if she needed range. She'd need to find something else. With a sigh, she slung the weapon over her shoulder and pushed off of the hot metal, preparing to go back into the disaster of the smallish transport vessel.

"I'm fairly certain there's a sniper rifle in there, if that's what you're after," Gabriel offered, listening in to her thoughts as he tried to contact survivors.

"I need something a little less large," she reasoned, though she did like the idea of it. "I can be picky since this is a virtual weapons cache. When I'm out there I'll lose that luxury." She stepped into the hull, head turning upward as she surveyed the damage. That shot had blown the ship wide apart. She didn't even know where the others had landed, and as much as she wanted that to be her first priority, she knew if she didn't cover herself first, there was a chance she'd never even make it to where they were.

"Back of the cage. M392s were loaded on, but I don't think anyone really had a chance to take any off," he said, his voice addressing the fact that they were the only survivors. Lisa hadn't been kidding when she'd said that the Archangels had personality; Gabriel was labeled as easy-going because in comparison to Uriel he was, but he had his own quirks — like his morbid remarks. She could see why they didn't use the Archangels with Spartans. Too much personality clashing inside that helmet would make for a messy result outside of it.

She picked her way over the bodies that had broken free of their harnesses, forcing herself to empty out her emotions for the time being. What had turned out to be something routine was beginning to take on a nightmarish quality already, and it wouldn't do her any good to mourn the needless loss of life. She made a point to snatch their tags off of them after claiming the DMR that Gabriel had found, along with a small medi-pack that she stuffed into a larger pack. After she felt confident that she had all she could carry, she left the wreckage and headed for the nearest shelter. No doubt there would be spotters to come survey the damage and check for survivors.

"I've tried reaching out, but so far no sign of them," Gabriel said. "I'm scanning the terrain now. This planet is unfamiliar to our data because of the electrical storms in the atmosphere. This desert terrain doesn't appear to go on forever, though. That series of mountains just up the way have some cave systems in them; the closer I get, the more I can try to map them out. If nothing else, it will provide us some shelter."

"Okay," she said, her voice alert. "That's where I'll head. In the meantime, just keep trying to find them."

There was a pause, and then Gabriel spoke. "She'll be okay with the

Arbiter. He promised that he would guard the two of you with his life. His kind take their word of bond very seriously," he said gently.

"They attacked us for a reason, Gabriel. John never would have summoned the Arbiter up if he thought that we weren't in immediate danger. Yes, the Covenant is a threat as a whole, but this was a mission that seemed to put Lisa right in the middle of things. She said she may have found a way to bring Cortana back, and then, suddenly, we're under attack? That's not a coincidence. Someone doesn't want that to happen, and they'll do their best to ensure it doesn't."

Gabriel, who had become fond of Lisa, and who had been always fond of Cortana, spoke in a very cold, measured voice. "Well, then I suppose we'll just have to see we find them before they find us."

Elizabeth had already begun to make her way to the mountains when Gabriel warned her that there was finally something approaching. "Drop!" he shouted. "I'll dull your shields down. It will make it so that their system doesn't pick you up, but it'll only work if you don't get spotted."

She dropped almost as he spoke, and to an onlooker it could have been almost comical, but Elizabeth wasn't laughing. She hit the dirt with her knees, having let them simply buckle as soon as he said to drop. She pressed her body against the sandy-coloured boulder, keeping her matte black suit in the cool dark of the shade as best she could, trying to blend in. She heard the alert as red flashed across the visor display, and knew that he had made good on his gamble of trying to erase her from any location devices.

She shifted uncomfortably, trying to avoid making any rapid motion to attract attention, and finally managed to wedge herself between the rocks enough to see through a sliver of space between them. She watched the ships drop, but when the squad filed out onto the dirt and sand, she realized that they weren't the typical batches of Unggoy or Kig-Yar.

"Brutes," Gabriel said, the word spat as though it left a bad taste in his mouth. "You'd better stay hidden until they lose interest. This suit is too heavily modified to support your unique designation. If one of them can connect that nasty weapon to you, that's it."

Elizabeth felt a little insulted by the AI's lack of faith in her to lack the ability to avoid the swing of their wickedly-crafted gravity hammers, but that didn't mean that she'd run out into the fray just to prove him wrong. She said nothing, instead choosing to watch as they searched the wreckage. She saw them converge when they realized that the identification tags they stole as trophies had already been claimed, and felt cold adrenaline wash over her as it became apparent that they knew someone had escaped.

She heard them grunting and roaring as they assessed the situation, and one massive creature with dark golden armor shushed them all and seemed to command their attention as he barked orders. She squinted, the suit's viewfinder zooming intuitively so that she could focus in on what was going on, and saw an orange weapon mounted to his

shoulder, while the tip of the aforementioned gravity hammer stuck out from behind his decorative armor and headgear.

"Oh, shit," she hissed.

"Agreed," Gabriel muttered. "They know someone got away. If you can move at a full sprint, we should be able to lose them in the caves. I'll have to map as we go, but from what I can tell, most of the entrances are too small for them. They'd have to bash their ways in, which I'm sure they'll try, but it won't be very fast. With any luck, I'll navigate you through to the other side of the range before they can even blast their way through the first cave system."

"Full sprint," she confirmed. "You got it, boss." She paused, then added, "Wait to re-activate my shields until you're sure they've spotted me. No reason to suddenly pop up on their radar if I don't have to, now is there?"

"That's a little dangerous," he warned. He'd been about to charge them before she took off. He knew very well how far the Type-33 Light Anti-Armor Weapon, designation Fuel Rod Cannon, could blast the green blobs of irradiated energy. He didn't even want to think about whether or not one of them had decided to bring along a Type 52 Directed Energy Support Weapon. She was fast, but she was no Sierra Zero Eight Seven.

"Just trust me," she advised. With that, she took a few breaths, then sprang out from behind the rock and began heading for the mountain path. She could see that she was only a klick or so away, so she tried to stay as close to cover as she could while she still had it. There was a wide open space right before the incline hit and the various sparsely-grown flora of the desert began. That would be where she'd need to really lay tracks.

Sure enough, when she hit the open space, she felt a sudden heat at her back. She turned just as a large glob of green, sparking mass hurtled itself at her would-be back, dropped and folded herself backwards into the ground as it sailed past her. It buried itself into a rock not fifteen paces ahead, the splash of it scorching the earth in a circle around it.

"I think we've been spotted," she said numbly, hearing the sound of her shields recharging themselves back up to maximum capacity.

"The War Chieften is leading the charge, but that doesn't mean the other ones aren't going to be difficult. Watch out," he warned. "They like to throw grenades, and they have pretty good arms for it." No sooner had he advised that than did Elizabeth see something land in front of her and stick itself out of the dirt. The top of it had spikes, and she could hear an audible hissing sound as its fuse wound down.

Elizabeth rolled to her feet and ran as fast as she could, but it wasn't fast enough. She felt something clip her in the back and her shields shrieked a low warning. There was immediate pressure in her head; the concussion from the blast made her slam around inside the suit enough that she felt real pain and she stumbled.

"BEHIND YOU!" Gabriel screamed.

It was too late. Elizabeth rolled over just as the roar of the massive Brute shook her eardrums. He took a flying leap at her, the massive hammer glinting off of the sunlight as it swung down. She stared back at him through her darkened visor, watching the hammer come right at her and feeling her skin prickle as the weapon's function applied immense gravitational pressure on her body right before impact.

25. 24: The Future

Nicholas Swift had watched the Spartan emerge from the wreckage at a safe distance. He had been deployed right before his own ship fell into line for the jump; the rest of his unit was far away, elsewhere, and he was alone. Or, he had been, until he saw the Spartan come out of the eviscerated hull on hands and knees and then roll onto its back for a long while. He didn't know if the Spartan was in full functioning condition, and the longer it remained motionless on the ground, the more he began to wonder if the man hadn't died from the shock of the landing.

"ODST November Sierra Zero Four Three reporting back to UNSC _Infinity_. Do you read, over?"

There was nothing.

He had abandoned his pod, thankful that it had landed behind a large smattering of desert trees, and made his way up the hill just enough to take cover and observe. His deployment had been a last-minute effort by the hands of Lasky just before everyone had jumped to avoid being blown apart by Covenant fire. He'd watched the ship that contained the Spartan, the Elite and the doctor (whose role he still wasn't sure about) get hit multiple times and make a move for the planet below. He even saw it light up as it hit atmo, but then it vanished amidst the wild electrical storm that formed a thick blanket around the world.

Lasky's command had been very last minute â€" as in, he watched the ship veer towards the planet, and he instantly heard the shouted orders over his com. "Swift! Go after them, now!" He'd turned, made a motion to his commanding officer indicating he was required elsewhere, and then popped the release on his pod and felt the dropping sensation as the world beneath him hurtled up at an alarming rate.

And now. Now, he sat behind some rocks in the shade, wondering if the Spartan's life had been over before it had begun. He had no idea who was in that suit, and he didn't particularly have any interest in finding out, but it did pain him to know that there had been several unnecessary deaths all in the name of a war that had been raging on for so long people had stopped caring about solving the problem. He looked over the rock, squinting.

The sunlight, he'd observed, was one-hundred percent artificial. Nothing could penetrate the storm; clearly not transmission, so he doubted the ability of his human eyes. It seemed to radiate from the horizon, almost mimicking the sun of Earth in a way, but even his HUD told him it was fake; some combination of light waves that operated on certain frequencies â€" and there he'd stopped reading.

There was a movement, and then finally, with much held breath, Nick saw the Spartan sit up. He watched it raise its hands to its helmet, shake its head a little, then push off of the ground. It moved in a circle around the ship, most likely surveying the damage, and then disappeared on the far side for a while. Eventually it came around and went into the wreckage, and from there he lost sight of it again for a while " until something else caught his attention.

There was a Covenant ship inbound. He grit his teeth and readied himself to run. He'd seen Spartans fight before, but he would never bank on someone else's skills before his own until he'd seen them in action, and right now he was pretty sure that the Spartan had suffered brain damage given how it moved around the ship. Then, suddenly, it came out of the wreckage with a cache of weapons stuck to its back, leg, and anywhere else it could get them to hold, a burst of speed jetting it towards where the rolling terrain gave way to mountain.

He realized at that moment that there was obviously no brain damage, but rather a very strong need to clear away from the wreckage as quickly as possible, and if he didn't do the same, he'd have much more to worry about than possible head trauma. He scrambled up the hill a little, just far enough that he could keep high ground if he needed to, and swapped his MA5 for his pistol. He crouched down to the ground and steadied his weapon, using the zoom through the viewfinder to survey the scene below.

Oh, fuck me, he thought to himself. The first one out of the ship wore dark burnished armor and carried something on its back that looked like an oversized mallet. It sparked blue energy from the top of it, and the sight of it made him a little nauseous. _Bravo Kilos_.

He watched as three more dropped down next to the War Chieftain, thankful only to see the ship take off. Evidently whoever had sent them assumed that the rather capable commanding Brute and his small extermination squad could handle whatever they had shot down. He still didn't even know, and he didn't like that the oversized rhino-monkeys knew more than he did at the moment. They all began making noise at each other and moving around the ship. His nausea only increased " he'd had a nano implant that allowed him to understand other languages as they hit the UNSC database. He could understand very clearly what they were saying, and it was mostly about how tasty the dead men in the ship would be, under the right cooking conditions.

Nick wouldn't even have the implant, or the displeasure of knowing what those asshole Bravos were saying, if it hadn't been for the time he'd spent in New Mombasa with the ODST unit sent in to clear the city out, and covertly rescue the Huragok from beneath it. Vergil, as he was called, had taken to him, and it had been the Huragok that had influenced the push for nano-implants with language additions for some of the ODSTs. Unfortunately, most of them deigned not to be like the Spartans, as most considered them freaks of nature, and so Swift had volunteered quietly, seeing only benefits from the advancement.

Of course, it didn't do much for his appetite when all he got to hear was rhino-monkeys talking about how to cook humans. His mouth twisted into a frown as he remembered himself, and his training, and steadied

his head " and his hand. He waited until they had all started to give chase to the Spartan, then quickly worked on picking off the lesser Brutes with precision. Two of them dropped like rocks, two headshots each all that had been necessary, but the third had spotted him and thrown up a protective shield before he could take the second shot.

Fuck it all, he thought to himself. He didn't want to do close-quarters battle with the bastards. Not if he didn't have to " and yet, that was how it looked. He vaulted over the rock, switching to his MA5 as quickly as he could while he darted towards it. He'd run at it face-first, knowing that the ape couldn't resist meeting him to battle. Sure enough, he ran right outside of the shield and at Nick, roaring.

Nick saw an opportunity and took it. As the Brute fired the Mauler, Nick dodged, knowing the clumsy Brute had committed to a path of directly ahead. He side-stepped around him, then reached out and grabbed onto the back of his armor. With a burst of strength, he pulled himself up onto the Brute's back, clenching the beast tightly with his legs, and planted the MA5 firmly at the back of the Brute's head. There was a loud, wet BRAAAP, and then both monkey and man fell forward. Nick hit his knees harder than he'd have liked, though the ape cushioned most of the fall.

"_You're lucky you're too ugly to be a rug_, " he said in carefully spoken Jiralhanae. He ran straight past the wreckage and after the Spartan. He'd never catch that one, but the Chieftain wore heavy armor and wasn't able to sprint nearly as fast as the other man was, so he was fairly certain he'd catch the ape first. As he made headway, he fired a few shots with his rifle, just to try and draw some of the attention off of the Spartan. He skittered to a stop as it was successful, then dove for cover as he watched the Chieftain stop only long enough to hurl two spike grenades in opposing directions " one clearly addressed for the Spartan, while the other his own early Christmas present. He winced as he felt the hot woosh of metal go over him, then stood. Much to his joy, most of it had embedded itself in a fat cactus that was just in front of him. He reminded himself to purchase one as soon as he had his feet back on his homeworld, and then set into his chase again.

Just as the Chieftain abandoned his FRC to use the nasty Grav-Hammer, Nick grabbed a plasma grenade from his belt and slung it. He knew from experience it wouldn't stick to the stupidly powerful armor the Brute wore, but it would stick to the weapon. The Brute stopped himself in mid-swing and made a loud noise of confusion at the blue glowing thing stuck to the handle of his hammer, then roared and flung it away before it exploded. He turned, looking back at Swift, whose presence he was suddenly aware of, and ripped the FRC from his back.

Just as Nick regretted his life decisions and began the dance of running in a zig-zag backwards while firing at the maw of the Chieftain with his rifle, he saw the Spartan stand up from the ground as though raised from the dead. The communication device inside his helmet buzzed to life as a female voice said, "Keep him busy. I've got a present for him."

"What do I get if I win?" he demanded, ducking as a blast from the FRC nearly melted his head from his body. The heat caused the skin on

his hands to burn as he instinctively put them up while he moved out of the way, and he winced.

"The continuous sound of my melodious voice," she offered. It sounded like the Spartan was out of breath, but it didn't seem to deter her movements any. He watched her from the corner of his eyes as she made a mad dash for the abandoned weapon. Upon using a boost of strength from the suit, she saw that it had not taken any damage from the plasma grenade.

"Well that's just _convenient_," Gabriel said cheerfully. "I've never had the pleasure of witnessing this firsthand."

"You almost did a second ago! Of course, now it's our turn," Elizabeth said, a strange glee in her voice. She ran straight at the Chieftain, who hadn't seemed to have tired in the least bit, and slid to a stop in the dirt. "HEY!" she yelled, allowing the vocals of the suit to project her voice much louder than it should have been.

The ape turned around, his fight with the ODST forgotten, and saw that she had his sacred weapon. He howled something loud and completely foreign at her, then lunged. Elizabeth swung the hammer at the last possible second. There was an incredibly loud sound, and she felt a crushing pressure on her chest cavity. She was aware that she was in the air, though she was still upright, and realized that the impact had propelled her back about ten feet or so. It had done worse for the ODST, flinging him into the same cactus that had evidently been his cover for the nasty grenade that it seemed he'd also been gifted with.

The Chieftain lay in a messy pool of blood and gore, his entire head caved in. Elizabeth dropped the weapon, feeling the stress of it suddenly relieved and her suit return to normal status. She made for the ODST, dropping down next to him to survey the damage.

"Are you okay?" she asked, switching to internal chatter.

He sat up in the dirt, giving his head a slight shake. "I think so," he said, glancing over his shoulder. The cactus that had been his shield had been mowed over when he'd flown into it. Those damn ape weapons were rough; he'd wanted to warn her, but he realized that it wouldn't have mattered much. Spartans generally landed on their feet, whereas he was slightly more squishy.

"Hell of a swing you got there," he observed, trying to laugh about the situation as he tested his limbs. No breaks or sprains, but he was certain that when he woke up next, he'd be in more than a little discomfort. It didn't warrant any immediate attention, though, and so he didn't say anything about it.

"Sorry about that," she said, and she sounded sincere. "I didn't know that would happen. Where did you even come from?" she asked. She forgot to thank him for saving her life, a point which she didn't immediately think of, while the AI inside her display certainly remembered.

"Good looking out, Soldier," Gabriel offered appreciatively.

Swift was stunned for a moment by the male addition to the conversation. For a moment his heart leaped, thinking that Lasky had

gotten his transmission. He felt slightly disappointed as he realized that it was only the AI the Spartan carried with her, and then felt stupid for getting as excited as he had. The AI seemed to sense this, and spoke.

"The storm up there is blocking all transmission. It's also preventing us from finding the rest of our party. We're lucky you got here when you did, or we'd be toast, but unfortunately even with my access to the UNSC database, I haven't got the ability to reach beyond the natural block this place has."

"That's really bad," Nick said, feeling a little numb. He'd been cut off before like this, wandering around a darkened city with a sense of total isolation. He didn't like it, and despite how it had turned out okay, he didn't want to repeat it. That seemed to be what was happening now. "To answer your question, ma'am, Lasky had to deploy my pod right before the _Infinity_ jumped. They weren't interested in fighting the Covenant when they had so many people on board who could impact this war with their death in the negatives." He paused. "Gunnery Sergeant Nick Swift, at your service, ma'am. Lasky sent me after you, presumably to get you off of this rock, but it sounds like we have some work to do before that can happen."

"Chief Petty Officer Elizabeth Force," she said, holding her hand out to him. He took it and clasped it tightly at the wrist, as she did to him. "Spartan Alpha Triple Oh, if you want to get official. I'm still not used to it myself," she admitted.

"CPO? Then I don't have to call you ma'am," he said good naturedly. He pushed himself off of the ground, then popped his helmet off to survey the damage. "Unless you want me to," he offered. His eyes fell from the Alpha to the helmet, lips pressed together in a frown as he ran his fingers over the scoring from some of the FRC shots. The soot came off with his fingertips, but still, he didn't like having that toxic weapon fired anywhere near him. He tried to avoid her gaze for the moment, if only because he'd recognized who she was the moment she'd introduced herself. How could he have thought she was a man? Or a regular Spartan? She was taller than he was, though - by a few inches, at least. Damn Mjolnir armor.

Elizabeth hesitated, then took off her own helmet. She was unaware that a trail of blood ran down her nose from the close encounter with the grenade and her low shielding, and pressed her hand to her face as she finally scented the coppery smell. She smiled a little as Swift spoke.

"I'd rather you didn't. So, Force and Swift? Sounds like we might make a good team," she offered. "Provided you don't have any problems with my designation," she added carefully. She was very aware how the attitude was to the Spartans. The IIIs were virtually all sociopaths, while the surviving II designations were strangely calm and quiet. That Elizabeth was already an anomaly didn't help that she was the only survivor to the bridge project that helped create the II's and it made people nervous, especially given her backstory. Turned out even an expunged record wouldn't re-establish your reputation. ONI had really gone after her once she'd been safely tucked away in the cooler to think about what she'd done for thirty-nine years, hadn't they? It was a fact she thought about every day, despite her son telling her that it didn't and would never matter.

"I'll be honest, it makes me a little nervous," he said truthfully. He saw her blue eyes narrow a little, but she nodded as though she understood his issue. "It isn't that I take issue with who you are, but you have to remember that I'm easier to kill than you are. Things like pounding a grav-hammer down two feet from me will hurt me more than they'll hurt you," he offered.

"Noted," she said. "But this is an old suit that's been modified because I'm not the type of Spartan you're used to dealing with. I may not be as squishy as you are," she said, borrowing Lisa's term, "but trust me, I'll still die just the same if my shields are gone and someone gets a lucky shot. The goal here is not to let that happen â€" to either of us."

It was the way she spoke that reassured him more than what she'd said. He nodded, then lifted his helmet back up. He hesitated in his movements, enough that she noticed it, and then figured he'd better just get his curiosities done and over with. "Is it true that they found you in cryo-storage?" he asked.

Elizabeth sighed a little, knowing that this would inevitably come up. "Yes," she said firmly. "It's also true that I'm probably twice as old as you, nearly the same age as my own son, and that I really did infiltrate Reach forty years ago to try and stop the Spartan II project before it went underway. Is there anything else you want to ask me, before we never speak about this again?" she said. She didn't sound annoyed, and it was a little refreshing in fact to have someone actually say it instead of just stare at her.

"Well, yeah," he said. "I do have one more question."

"Yeah?" she asked, lowering her own helmet back down over her head after reaching back to ensure that her long braid was safely tucked inside her suit.

"Is it true what they said? Can you really recover Cortana?" That was another thing he'd heard, but it was less a rumour and more the last thing he'd heard Sierra One One Seven shouting to the doctor before the Arbiter had taken the two women with him to his waiting ship. He knew he shouldn't have overheard it, but he didn't stick around to find out more details, instead rushing right past the Spartans and to where Kelly had pointed him â€" the path they'd cleared for the ODSs to bail in case they had to deploy before the jump should something go wrong.

The question took her by surprise, and her mouth dropped open. She stopped with her helmet and let it fall comfortably into the grip of her left hand. She didn't know how to answer him, but she realized that if he was stuck with them, he may as well know what sort of ride he was in for.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything," he said quickly.

"Wait," she said, holding a hand up to stop him from putting his helmet back on. She looked into his eyes, then nodded. "We think there is a way," she said softly. "And it's a long shot. It involves a lot of Forerunner stuff that I don't think any of us are going to like, but she's sure of herself. She's so sure that it's scary, because I was in her position once. When you know something in your

bones, know it so much that it consumes your every waking thought... you'd do anything to get that knowledge to fruition. Her father helped me realize my own potential, even now after his death," she said, gesturing to herself. "So I owe it to her to do the same. And to my son."

"Wow," Swift said, after a long moment of silence. "You're everything they said you were."

"And more," she promised. "And there's nothing I wouldn't do for the people I love. If you can't fall into step with that, I won't fault you. You didn't ask for this, and I won't make you be part of it. Lasky sent you for a reason, though. All I ask is that you consider what that reason is." She put her helmet back on with an audible click, once again concealing her stunning features from the world, and went back to retrieve the hammer again. She'd have to lose a weapon in order to carry it, but she felt it would be useful enough to have " especially in a damn cave.

"Switch me for the shotgun," Swift said, coming alongside her. "I don't know where we're going, but if you want firepower that heavy, I'm your man," he said, his voice holding an edge of promise to it on their internal chatter.

"You'd better not shoot me with it by mistake," she warned him, sliding it off of her shoulder and holding it out.

"Keep the end of that hammer pointed away from me, and I'll do my best not to catch you up in my fervor," he said.

Gabriel began vocalizing his plan to the both of them for the path they'd take through the cave systems, but even while they concentrated on his briefing, they couldn't stop their own internal thoughts. Swift had never had something that mattered to him as much as this woman seemed to, and it somehow made him feel guilty he'd said he'd go. Force, on the other hand, could sense that the Marine had a fire in him that wouldn't be put out quite so easily. He was exactly the type of partner she needed.

26. 25: The Present

Lisa sank back into her chair at her work station, throwing her feet up onto her desk as she waited for her information to finish processing. Nearly five months had passed since Elizabeth had been fitted with the modified IV suit. It had ended up a beautiful craft, one that suited her perfectly, and Elizabeth had been receiving routine training with the rest of the existing Spartans just like anyone else would. She could finally focus on the real thing that had been eating away at her brain: Cortana.

It was exhausting, that AI. She'd tried to get as much information as she could from the database, but where that fell short, she had to find answers with the Chief. He was reluctant to tell her anything, even now that they'd been seeing a lot of each other and he was more comfortable with her presence. She could understand why it was still hard, because it was a deeply personal issue that he had to dredge up, and she believed that he would rather try to accept her death and move on rather than put hope in some small possibility that Lisa could do what she thought. In short, speaking to the Chief " or

John, as it now went, was draining her mentally. The man had a way about him, and he didn't seem to even be aware of it at times.

She heaved a sigh of that exhaustion, letting the fork she'd been using to spear lettuce and bits of carrot with to drop into the small plastic salad dish and become covered with dressing. She just couldn't find her appetite lately, and she knew well and good why. She leaned forward far enough to drop the container onto the desk with a loud clunk, and then slouched forward with her elbows on the white surface, scrubbing her hands over her eyes and groaning.

The door opened behind her, causing her to turn so sharply that she nearly fell out of her chair. John stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. He looked like he was every bit as exhausted as she was, and she realized that it was close to midnight by the clock on her display.

"Where'd you just come from?" she asked, not sure if he'd even tell her. Or if he could.

He shrugged. "Running routine with a batch of marines." He didn't offer any more explanation, though it was only because he stopped himself short. He didn't need to tell her any more than that, honestly, but he didn't like that he felt that he should offer more. In truth, the man in charge of the small unit he was working alongside had stock in alcohol, more than any one man should have, and John had spent a lot of time cleaning up his mistakes while simultaneously trying to teach these men who should already know how to keep themselves alive just that integral skill.

He studied her for a moment, then spoke. "Not hungry?" he asked, nodding to her abandoned food. He was, he realized, his eyes drifting to the salad. When did he eat last? He didn't know; couldn't remember. He could hear his mother's voice now on the merits of sustaining his health, and resisted the urge to smile in spite of himself.

"Not anymore," she said honestly. She turned away from him for a second to cease the scrolling data across her display, then paused. He could feel the loaded questions about to come, and dropped into a chair to brace himself against the sudden fatigue he felt creeping into his legs. Could this shit just be over, for once in his life?

"John," she began, his name still sounding strange as it came from her mouth. He'd only just recently told her to quit being so formal with him when they were all in a closed setting, but he could tell that she still felt reserved about it.

"John," she said again. "You do know that I'm not crazy, right?" Her voice was so soft then that it was almost inaudible, and a wave of emotion hit him, hard. It was exactly the thing he was trying to avoid, that rush. That reminiscence. She was so eager, so smart. She reminded him so much of the glittering blue AI that had utterly captivated him in her lifetime, so much that sometimes it hurt to hear her speak.

His silence was unfortunate, because he could see that she took it as an answer to the negative. She turned her back to him, something he wasn't used to her doing, and he clenched his jaw and felt anger

replace that emptiness where Cortana had left her mark before she'd been ripped away. The room was silent enough to hear a pin drop, even over the gentle hum of her computers, and his hands balled into fists as he resisted the urge to hit something to satisfy himself.

"I don't think you are," he said, his voice very tense.

His response caused her to turn back around in the chair, her eyes on him. Studying him, scrutinizing him. She said nothing, as though she was forcing him to speak. They'd gone to war suddenly, and it provoked him.

It was the first time in a long time he felt so adequately sized up, and he didn't like it when it came from someone who had achieved a closer perspective of him — especially when that involved knowledge he wouldn't share with just anyone. It was enough to push him over the edge, however brief, and as he began to speak, he could see the shock on her face. He just didn't care.

"Lisa, listen to me, because I'm only going to say this once. Cortana was everything to me. Everything. After all of the shit I've been through, all of the shit I've been put through and put myself through, she was the only one who ever understood or even tried to empathize. I am alone. I have been alone since I was six. Even among friends, I always stood apart somehow. And after watching everyone that I care about, with the exception of maybe one or two people, die, do you honestly think that this subject could somehow not be incredibly painful for me to talk about? Or that I just don't fucking want to? I get that you think that you can resurrect her somehow, but I know what possibility and probability are. Is what you're saying possible? Maybe, sure. I'm not god, not even close, so I can't say for certain that it's not. But is it probable? Would I actually be willing to stake the lives of the people I have left on it? No."

He fell into a stunned silence, letting the last of his louder than intended words echo around the room. It felt like they were darts, ricocheting off of the walls and coming right back at him, but he owed it to himself to finally express that anger, however horribly he'd just addressed his friend, because she didn't know how every time she tried to bring this subject up she was gouging out a little piece of him. He hadn't expected her to react like she did, though, and instantly felt guilt wash over the anger, one tide into the other, as he saw her eyes drop and close as they began to water.

He had meant to make her understand. He hadn't meant to make her cry.

"Get out," she said, her voice more rigid than he'd ever heard it. He watched as she took a shuddering breath, steeling herself in a way that he'd seen Elizabeth do on many occasions, and slammed his hands down onto his legs, looking up at the ceiling as he tried to recover from the obvious hole he'd dug.

"I didn't mean -"

"John," she said, her tone raising at the end. "Please, just go."

"No," he said stubbornly. He stood up, subconsciously aware that

his height intimidated her, and tried to reason with her. "I'm _sorry_," he spat. "This is new territory, and I don't like it. I'm at the end of my rope with all of this new information mixing with my life and turning it upside down."

She _jumped_ out of her seat, coming to stand as close to him as she ever had before. She squared herself, facing off with him even from her short height, and stared straight up at him. "I have been turning my head inside out looking through Forerunner _nonsense_ to try and give you peace. I have a thought in my head, a path that's blocked somehow, and I'm going over and over in some sort of recursive loop just trying to get it _out_. I have literally run myself into the ground to try and help _you_, and I have been doing that for the better part of a year, now. I _had_ my own life, and now it's gone, because as soon as I started getting involved with all of this, it took me over. It's like I don't even live in my own body anymore. I just visit every once in a while, while this Forerunner _code_ just bounces around in my head, triggering things they shouldn't."

He actually took a step back, surprised at her sudden display of ferocity. Of course, she was tenacious â€" he actually liked that about her, because thus far it had seemed as though she would go to the ends of the galaxy for his mother. For him, though? This was news. More guilt hit him, hard. The idea that he wasn't worth all of this trouble, more to the point, and it just made that burning sensation in his chest come back with a vengeance.

"Then stop," he said firmly. "Stop reading. Stop learning. Stop _knowing_. Just _stop_, before you really do just..." and he let his words fall off into nothing, because he didn't want to believe that she'd really lose her mind, and the endless shitstorm that would come after it.

"You don't get it," she said, her voice suddenly down in volume. She turned away from him, and for a minute he almost thought that leaving might actually be the best thing to do, but she pulled up something on the computer that made him freeze in place. She turned back to him, a very haunted look in her eyes.

"You see it, too, don't you?" she asked.

He nodded, swallowing hard. He felt his jaw clench again, and he forced himself to stop before he cracked a tooth. There on the monitor, as plain as day (to him), amidst a jumble of Forerunner glyphs and other strange writing, was a message. It was small, and if he didn't focus, it just sort of blended in to the rest. When he did focus, though, it was utterly, unmistakably, as clear as a blue sky.

Help me, John.

27. 26: The Future

Thel 'Vadam was the first to awaken from the crash, but that was no surprise. The human doctor was lucky that she had enhanced healing capabilities, and he was thankful that they had protected her where he could not. Even with his promise to the Spartan, he could not save someone from a fall out of orbit, no matter how much he wanted to. This was told to him by the body of his friend Rtas, who hung limply

in the chair of the ship that had been blown in half.

He muttered words of an ancient prayer as he clasped his brother's shoulder one final time, telling himself that it was useless to feel grief when the Sangheili had died a noble death, and exited from the wreckage. He had no idea if the other member of his party was even still alive, and multiple attempts to contact her had been thus far unsuccessful. It made him afraid, an emotion he was unfamiliar with, and in turn, that only motivated him to find the other half of the ship in hopes that she would be there. At least the end with the few UNSC who had accompanied them was on her side "with any luck, they would be alive, or at the very least, she would have weapons at her access. He only had his sword and a plasma pistol he'd retrieved; the doctor a handgun that had managed not to come out of the holster at her thigh on impact.

He heard her moan as she sat up and watched as her fingers clenched the soft moss and leaves around her as she did so. "What happened?" she asked. She looked around, then immediately jumped to her feet when she realized that they were missing half of the ship. "Where's Elizabeth?" she cried.

"Calm yourself," he advised, approaching her with caution. "We were hit with several heavy guns from a Covenant assault ship. Our own vessel split in half. I, too, was knocked unconscious, but I have faith that your friend is still alive. She is most likely with the other half of the ship, and I will guide us to it," he said. He gestured for her to sit on a fallen log so that she wouldn't do more harm to herself while her body tried to mend whatever damage it had taken from the drop.

"Your friend?" she asked, dropping onto the log at his instruction.

Thel was silent for a beat, and then said only, "He died an honourable death. He will not be forgotten."

"I'm sorry," she offered sincerely.

"Don't be," was all he replied. He moved closer to her, crouching his massive frame down so he could better survey her injuries. The plasma burn on her leg was still unhealed, though much better than it had been before; he didn't know how her ability worked, but if he had to guess, he would assume that it went for the most detrimental injuries first. "How do you feel?"

The blonde, he noticed, had no hesitation looking at him "or speaking to him, actually. It was an aversion most humans had, and naturally so "the only one who didn't seem to shy away from him was the Master Chief, but the Arbiter knew that it was only because of their history. In the beginning, that particular Spartan had not been a supporter of his, that was certain.

"Tired," she said honestly. "I think I'm concussed." She paused, moving her limbs around slowly "feet, then legs; arms, then fingers. He watched with interest. "Nothing important is broken," she informed him, "but I think a rib might be pointed in the wrong direction." She waved it away as though it wouldn't pose a problem. "I think we can move, now."

Thel 'Vadam was many things, but he wasn't stupid. He knew enough of the human anatomy to know that the ribs protected something precious beneath — the lungs came to mind, for starters. "Absolutely not," he said, denying her request to leave. "We will stay as long as it takes for your rib to mend itself. It's better if we get an idea of the terrain before we start to travel, anyways. I would not think that simply choosing a direction and heading that way could yield a favourable result."

The doctor said nothing, only offering a defeated sigh in response. He was thankful she did not attempt to argue. Thel should not like to have to render her unconscious in order to keep his promise. It seemed as though it were not the right way to go about doing it.

He stood when he was satisfied that she had no other injuries he could see, and sure that she wasn't hiding any more serious ones. His first goal was to go back into the wrecked ship and try to locate some sort of pulse beacon that could at least tell him where the other ship was. If nothing else, it would send out a signal to the AI carried by the Spartan Alpha to tell them where he was. The only issue was that if they chose to, or were otherwise forced to, move away from the downed ship, what would be there to say where they had gone?

It was a dilemma he did not want to face at the moment.

He collected what medical kits he could find, bringing those out and placing them in a pile with a handful of other useful items. If his plasma pistol failed, his energy sword would be his primary line of defense. He had no doubt that he could make it work, but it wasn't much for range. He had no idea that at that very moment, the Spartan Alpha was sharing his problem in some fashion on the other side of the mountains, but he would have been amused to know it.

"Unfortunately, there is no ammunition for your weapon on board," he told the woman. "Have you ever used Covenant weaponry before?"

"I don't think it'll be an issue," she said. Her voice was confident, and it made Thel wonder why. "I'm a pretty good shot," she added.

"Very well," he said, glad to know that she wouldn't be useless if something were to happen to him. "Conserve your munitions. I have plenty for my own weapon. If it comes down to it, I will allow you to do the range work while I move in. Hopefully, it won't come down to it."

The doctor nodded. "Do you have any idea where we are?" she asked. She knew they hadn't gotten far, and the planet didn't seem like any world she recalled being so close to where they'd been parked before the departure.

"In truth, I do not," Thel said. He sat down next to her again, giving her quite a bit of space. "It is no world I am familiar with. Perhaps the ship's navigation will give us more information?" he suggested. While he went to check, the doctor dug into the medical packs and tried to condense them as best she could to make them easier to take.

Inside the ship, Thel began trying to pull up the navigational system. The ship had no power, but he knew there would still be at least battery capabilities that could allow the data to transfer. When nothing happened at all, he set his mandibles firmly together in displeasure. He did not like the idea of having no true knowledge of his location. Emerging from the ship, he went back to the doctor.

"Didn't work, did it?" she asked, her voice knowing.

"It did not," Thel agreed. "How did you know?"

She pointed upward, where, though the hole in the trees that the ship had made, the sky above seemed to churn and vomit clouds over and over on itself. Bolts of lighting flashed back and forth in some sort of eternal dance, and a strange, artificial light winked across the horizon beyond them.

"It's an electrical storm," she said softly. "There exists a planet in Earth's system much like it, only it's hardly livable. I'm not sure why that's like that, but this," she said, gesturing around her, "is like this. It's not natural."

"The sunlight is artificial," he offered. "My display can tell me that much. We are on a nameless world with a false sun and a storm eternally brewing overhead. This does not bode well for us, I fear," he said honestly. He looked at the doctor, surprised that she, again, was looking straight back at him.

"There's more," she said cryptically. She stood slowly, causing Thel to reach out to help stabilize her. She turned to him and smiled, then gently pushed his clawed hand away, starting for a very specific group of trees that had luminescent lichen attached to their bark.

"What is it?" he asked, following her now at a safe distance. He didn't want to crowd her, especially since she had, albeit lightly, directed him out of her space.

"It's... beautiful," she marveled. She pressed her palm to the tree, and it seemed to glitch, if that were possible. He'd never seen anything like it before "or, he had, but not in such a format. The bark faltered and glittered for a split second, the lichen turning into strange soft blue-white symbols against an ivory beam of light that was somehow tangible.

"It's called Hard Light," he said. He walked to the other side of it, but when he reached out to touch it, the image faltered and reverted back to the same brown tree with lichen on it from before. Curious, he removed his hand. It seemed that it responded to the doctor's touch, but not his own "that fact only cemented as, when she took her own hand away, it returned to normal yet again.

"It simply appears as a tree now," he said. "How strange."

"Is that what you see?" she asked, looking at him with her brows lofted.

Thel paused. He looked around them, then back to the doctor. "Yes," he finally answered, satisfied that he could find no other flaws

within the forest. "It's all just a normal forest. A little dense, but a forest nonetheless."

She smiled, her eyes sparkling with a liquid that he knew to be tears.

"Why are you crying?" he asked, his voice betraying his surprise. To his knowledge, she was not upset. On the contrary, she was smiling, which indicated that she was happy.

"They're... they're all so _beautiful_," she whispered. She put her hands to her mouth, sinking to the ground. The Arbiter realized that she wasn't sad, but rather awestruck. "I wish you could see them, Arbiter. They're just... Oh my god," she said again. She turned her head, backing away from the tree.

"What?" he demanded. "I see nothing! I don't doubt that you see something, but I see -"

And then she grabbed his hand tightly, and he saw.

All around them, tiny motes of light fluttered. They looked like " he didn't even know how to describe them, but there in the shadows of the forest, it seemed like _magic_ somehow, and since Thel didn't consider himself a subscriber to that idea, he was very conflicted. He could not deny that the tiny motes dancing by, the little instances of brightly burning light that danced around them in synch with each other, were beautiful indeed. He was unsure of why, but he knew that they were.

He was also very aware of the human gripping his hand as she laughed and cried. Pulling herself up through the weight of her grip on him, she dragged him forward until they were practically dancing in circles among the motes. He could feel their warmth upon his face, and watched how they seemed to burn more brightly just before fading into the earth beneath their feet. Thel 'Vadam, despite having just experienced total terror and loss, felt something he hadn't felt in a very long time.

Peace.

End
file.